

Translation, or: Can things get any worse?

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Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues.

- Shaikh Abdullah Azzam

To end this talk, I ask all who find in it truth, from all Muslims and in particular those who work in the mass media and in Internet and in Media publication, and relevance to consider its publication and distribution -- in all languages and as widely as possible -- a trust on his shoulders.

- Ayman al-Zawahiri (September 2005)

Early in No Man's Land, Danis Tanovic's bitterly funny film about the war in Bosnia, one Bosnian soldier asks another -- as they sit, immobilized in the fog, on what turns out to be a battlefield -- whether he knows the difference between a pessimist and an optimist. The soldier shrugs. The answer: "a pessimist thinks things can't get any worse. An optimist knows they can."

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What sort of language is war, if it is one? Eyal Weizman has suggested, in his contribution to the "Dictionary of War" project, that we need to understand war as a

discourse, but more precisely as a threatened one, a self-erasing one, a language endangered by its own capacity to destroy and hence to destroy itself. He begins from a phrase uttered by the General Secretary of Hezbollah during the January 2006 war, which he describes as a rhetorical question -- "Do you want total war? Because if you do, we are ready for it" -- and goes on to interpret this "limit concept of war" as meaning a "war that allow no longer any communication between the enemies to take place." This leads him to the following set of claims about what we could call non-total wars:

Every other war is as well a discourse between the enemies. [...] The language component of war exists in the gap between the level of destruction which is "possible" and the level of destruction which is "actually applied" in every given situation. That gap between what you "can do" to somebody and what you "actually do", is the gap into which language and discourse can enter. Threats are obviously the easiest kind of discourse to communicate and understand on the battle field. [...] Military threats could function only if gaps are maintained between the possible destruction an army can inflict in the application of its full destructive capacity, and the actual destruction it does inflict. [...]. A degree of restraint is thus part of the logic of almost every conventional military operation: however bad military attacks appear to be, they could always get worse. Every escalation, or radicalization of war always seeks to leave the potential to make it even worse than what it is. Any escalation could work as language only if one could escalates the war further. At the moment this gap between the "possible" and the "actual" application of force closes, war is no longer a language, violence

is stripped of semiotics and simply aims to make the enemy disappear as a subject.

Let us agree provisionally that there is something important about treating war as a language. What Eyal's interpretation suggests is that it is an unusual one, a language which can cease being a language when it passes a certain threshold. That condition, when language ceases, he calls "total war." For him, the discursivity of less-than-total war is defined by its less-than-totality, its unfinished status, the gap that remains between the possibilities of destruction and what's actually done. As long as there is a gap, the violence remains a threat, which is to say, an invitation to further discourse and dialogue. The logic of this is counter-intuitive, but careful: as long as escalation is possible, as long as still more destruction remains to come, then so does the possibility of less, and hence there is an offer being made, a proposition, a move in a negotiation.

So what would "total" conflict be? When does escalation become impossible? Is it when, as the French news magazine Le Nouvel Observateur described the summer 2006 Israeli assault on Hezbollah, and the Lebanese response, on its cover (20-26 July 2006), "La Guerre des Fous," when the war is crazy, crazed, delirious, out of control? What would that mean? Is this what happens when war is no longer a means but an end in itself, or when killing for the sake of killing -- rather than for a reason, and idea, a cause, a country -- takes over as the norm and not the exception? Or should the term total war be reserved for those events when a genocidal, eradicator, annihilatory, cleansing logic governs the conduct of fighting, when the aim is simply to kill all of the others, to force

them to surrender and submit unconditionally and absolutely, to make them disappear as subjects or speakers in a dialogue or an exchange? When the violence is not exercised in order to force others into a conversation, or to change the terms of a debate, but in order to end the debate, to remove the other party from the debate once and for all, when debate itself -- or politics, or language -- is itself the target of the violence is that the limit? Is that the moment when things actually can't get any worse?

Just a little more than a year ago, the then Foreign Minister of Israel, Tzipi Livni, offered us a slightly different way to think about this. Speaking about the logic of her government's assault of the Gaza Strip, she was reported to have said the following to Israel Radio Reshet Bet (it was in Hebrew, of course, and I have not yet been able to find the original source, but here are a couple of versions from international media):

She said the Gaza offensive had restored Israel's "deterrence" against militant factions seeking to attack it, hurt Hamas' ability to fire rockets against it and "changed the equation" between it and the radical Islamic movement ruling Gaza. Hamas now understands that Israel will act "wildly" to any attacks against it, she said regarding the "deterrence." (DPA)

The operation's objective had been secured: Israel 'responded recklessly' to Hamas' rocket fire, and it's a 'good thing we did,' said Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in an interview. (YNETNEWS)

Or most fully,

We have proven to Hamas that we have changed the equation. Israel is not a country upon which you fire missiles and it does not respond. It is a country that when you fire on its citizens it responds by going wild – and this is a good thing.

(Independent)

In making this statement, Livni echoed a phrase uttered by former IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, at about the same time but explaining the logic, if it is one, of the 2006 Lebanon war: "I believed that if we crave life in this Mideast arena, we have to sometimes just 'go crazy'."

We could analyze her statement according to the paradigm of the open secret, as for instance when US officials simultaneously offered their solemn public assurances that "America does not torture" while boasting in leaks on the front page of our newspapers that various senior leaders of al-Qaeda had been subjected to waterboarding and a series of other 'interrogation techniques' which clearly violated the prohibition on torture. Livni's military, as Eyal has documented carefully in a piece on "Legislating Warfare," had gone to great lengths to conduct the Gaza operation in accordance with the rules of international humanitarian law: warning civilians on the phone and by SMS, dropping dummy bombs prior to real ones (the knock on the roof), using highly discriminatory weapons like drones for precise attacks, carefully calculating the tonnage and blast effects of aerial weapons to minimize collateral injuries, and so. He asks:

Is it possible that the attack on Gaza was not restrained by an extensive use of IHL - but rather, that a certain interpretation and application of this law have enabled [the infliction ...] of otherwise inconceivable levels of destruction? Has the [...] destruction been perpetrated with the full force of the law? If this is so, should those who oppose Israeli violence use the language of international law?

The questions are important, and need to be answered. But they do not take into account the notion of 'going wild,' and the twist which it adds to the predicament. We are law-abiding, and we go wild. What is it to say both at once? It is not simply a contradiction, or hypocrisy, nor is it a confession. It is, I think, a sort of message -- a message about the capacities and limits of messaging, of communication or of discourse. There is an equation, she says, an exchange or a system of substitution in place: you do this, we do that. There is a logic, and a certain measure of if-then predictability. The game has rules which are shared by both interlocutors. Now, Israel wants to "change the equation," but not simply to change the rules or the algorithm (no longer is it if 2, then 2, or 4) but to disrupt the logic of the equation altogether. "Going wild" means no longer making sense, no longer participating in the system of discursive exchange, no longer adhering to the rules or the norms that make signs and signals understandable. The discourse no longer seeks to be understood, in effect. Perhaps she is saying: we want to destroy the equation part of the equation, and at the same time continue to treat that destruction as if it were a message. There will be no message, she effectively says, and you had better get that message. At this point, can we say with Eyal, "war is no longer a language, violence is

stripped of semiotics and simply aims to make the enemy disappear as a subject"? What sort of message is that?

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Clausewitz argued famously in On War that "war is a true political instrument," a means and nothing more, "merely the continuation of policy by other means," (99) and went on to ask: "Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is not war just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic" (731).

The logic, the reason, of conflict is thus political ... for Clausewitz, politics is essentially logic, logos, discourse, people reasoning with one another, thinking and speaking, exchanging notes and other things. But there are different ways or forms of speaking, grammars and rhetorics which shift according to the aims of the speakers and the effects which they seek to produce in their interlocutors. He understands them as means, instruments, tools in the effective expression of thoughts ... and one of them is war, a grammar (among others) of politics.

This notion has today achieved the status of common sense -- political actors use violence, even wars, as moves in a game, as instruments in the service of other ends.

On the other hand, the self-evidence of this position is challenged by another, equally-common-sensical notion -- namely, that war in fact marks the breakdown of politics, its failure. When we can no longer have a conversation, engage in the game of persuasion or reasoning or even threatening, where there is no possibility of further exchange, when the negotiations break down, there is fighting. One "resorts" to force when diplomacy has run its course. An elegant exemplar of this position is the phrase attributed to Colin Powell in David Hare's play about the American decision to go to war in Iraq, Stuff Happens:

Powell: Maybe because my whole life has been in the army I'm less impressed by the use of force. I see it for what it is.

Bush: What is it?

Powell: Failure. (49)

In this sense, the onset of war marks the limit at which politics ceases. Talking has failed, there is no longer any exchange, and rather than trying to persuade my opponents I now seek to kill them. Their agreement is not what I seek, but their surrender. So war or violence would be pure coercion, the conversion of the other from subject to object.

What if both positions were correct? There is something true about both of these claims, but they are quite irreconcilable. The limit between politics and violence, between language and war, seems at once necessary and impossible. This undecidability may in fact be the defining feature of the situation. War would then constitute both the continuation of politics in violence, and its undoing, collapse, abandonment. War would

then be a kind of discourse which constantly threatens, unpredictably, to become an assault on discourse itself -- and we are lacking reliable tools to detect when exactly that happens -- at any moment, it may already have become that. In other words, we can never be quite sure whether things actually can get any worse ...

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Writing in the Guardian, on the day after the attacks of September 11, 2001, Saskia Sassen called them (this was the title) "A Message From the Global South." She did not hesitate to interpret the events, to specify their meaning, and indeed to interpret them as primarily a semiotic or communicative project, a message or even a meta-message. But she was more precise. Using words which have since been widely quoted, she wrote that the attacks bore witness to a failure in communication or to a "translation problem," a problem which they had, in fact and in act, solved:

Part of the challenge is actually to recognize the interconnectedness of forms of violence that we do not view as being connected or even as forms of violence. We are suffering from a translation problem. The language of poverty and misery is unclear and uncomfortable. The language of yesterday's attacks is clear. [...] We may think that the debt and growing poverty in the south have nothing to do with the violence in New York and Washington. But they do. The attacks are a language of last resort: the oppressed and persecuted have used many languages to reach us so far, but we seem unable to translate the meaning. So a few have

taken the personal responsibility to speak in a language that needs no translation.

[emphasis added]

David Rieff called this claim "an exercise in depraved rationalization" (salon.com), and he was not entirely wrong. The leadership of al-Qaeda did not immediately take responsibility for September 11 -- nor for July 7 in London or March 11 in Madrid -- but they did later, and the terms in which they then explained the attacks put the emphasis on the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate rather than the overcoming of poverty and misery. But in the immediate aftermath, in the gap between act and declaration, statements like Sassen's, along with very different ones, proliferated.

One of the different ones came from Michael Ignatieff, also in the Guardian, three weeks later, who wrote that the assaults could not be rightly placed in the realm of "politics.

There were no demands, and there never will be. No one took political responsibility for the act, and no one ever will. This was a deed committed without any expectation of attaining a political objective. [...]

What we are up against is apocalyptic nihilism. The nihilism of their means -- the indifference to human costs -- takes their actions not only out of the realm of politics, but even out of the realm of war itself. The apocalyptic nature of their goals makes it absurd to believe they are making political demands at all. They are seeking the violent transformation of an irremediably sinful and unjust world.

Terror does not express a politics, but a metaphysics, a desire to give ultimate meaning to time and history through ever-escalating acts of violence which culminate in a final battle between good and evil. People serving such exalted goals are not interested in mere politics.

Implicit here is an analysis of politics which sees it as a rational enterprise, a structured confrontation or conversation aimed at compromise or reconciliation, the exchange of demands and the negotiation of outcomes. There is something obviously appealing about such a definition, and I think something correct in the suggestion that the acts were in fact aimed at politics itself rather than being part of it. (That would make Sassen's position dangerously incorrect.) But there is also something wishful about the desire to protect politics from irrationality and persuasion, and to protect the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, a hint of a larger claim that violence can and ought to be strictly severed from politics except as law enforcement, and indeed that the absolute values productive of irreconcilable or irremediable differences (what he calls metaphysics) might properly be excluded from politics.

But we could easily ask, and ought to: what do we have politics for, if not to deal with the irreconcilable, with metaphysics, with identities, identifications, values for which people are prepared to stake their lives, their liberties, and their honor?

This, in fact, might be seen as the structuring or constitutive contradiction at the heart of that democratic political discourse which talks in terms of human rights. On the one hand,

the droits de l'homme signify a world without God, without absolutes, without any external authority beyond us humans -- and thus the necessity of discourse, of talking with each other and deciding who counts as "us" or as "each other" and what it is to be one of us. Without declarations, claims, responses, exchanges, negotiations, there are no human rights. On the other hand, what are human rights if not the absolutely non-negotiable, given, fundamental core elements and values which make us what we are, the claims on which we can make no compromises and for which we ought to be prepared to fight, for ourselves and others? We will not escape this dilemma...

In any case, to return to Sassen, the dream of a clear, universal, language, a language that evades or overcomes both the difference between languages and the internal opacities of mediation or signification, is an old one, and it takes a variety of forms. Sometimes they are banal -- film (or music, or flowers) is a universal language -- and sometimes they are sentimental -- everyone speaks the language of the heart. They are often theological, either the nostalgic desire to return to a moment before the dispersion of Babel or the millenarian dream of a final unification. But sometimes, and these are of course the more interesting times, they are violent.

Recall Roland Barthes' marvelous fable of the woodcutter, which has the virtue of defining a certain genre of language as "political":

If I am a woodcutter and I am led to name the tree which I am cutting down [j'abats], whatever the form of my sentence, I speak the tree, I do not speak about

it. This means that my language is operative, linked to its object in a transitive way; between the tree and myself, there is nothing but my labor, that is to say, an act. This is a political language: it presents nature to me only to the extent that I am going to transform it, it is a language by which I act the object; the tree is not an image for me, it is simply the meaning of my action. But if I am not a woodcutter, I can no longer speak the tree, I can only speak of it, about it.

(French 233)

To speak: a transitive verb, we might say ... if you are a woodcutter or some other agent of change. Then, language is an act, without mediation or image, operating an immediate transformation, and hence it is politics: that is Barthes' chain of reasoning. It is a little confusing: if I speak, and if my speech coincides with my action, if it "presents" (instead of representing, as "image" or as referent) the object of my action to me insofar as I act to transform that object, then it is "political" speech, which is to say "operative" language. Barthes effectively makes this definitional: what is political is what is operative, active, transformative, destructive.

He does not suggest that 'speaking the tree' actually cuts it down, nor that it is required in order to cut it down, but only that language used in a certain manner by certain agents can overcome the distance of representation. Others -- the theorists of performativity, from J.L. Austin through de Man and Derrida to Judith Butler and others -- have thought about some forms of language itself as operative.

Nor is Barthes talking about a language that is like violence, about some figurative 'violence of language.' He is distinguishing between different kinds of language, different speakers and contexts, and isolating a particular form of speech which, when it coincides with an external action ("if ... I am led to name the tree which I am cutting down"), itself acts, violently. Indeed "action" means, in this case, the radical erasure of distance, mediation, reference, representation -- the collapse of any distance between language and object, the elimination of any hermeneutic or interpretive dimension.

Sassen shares with Barthes a certain fascination with overcoming the opacities or indirections or diversions of language, and like him imagines that violence or force can accomplish this labor of clarification and transparency.

This claim, or wish, bears more than a passing resemblance to a series of theorems on force as a language. It is often said that this or that enemy 'understands only the language of force,' and although the political targets and implications vary widely, the claim has a consistent logic: not that language is force, but that force is a (kind of) language, and not just any language. It is one which solves the problem that seems endemic to all things linguistic, namely: failure, indirection, misunderstanding, drift.

Generally, this claim testifies to what is presented as a problem in the reader, interpreter, or listener. He or she doesn't understand: 'no matter how patiently and repeatedly we've explained things, he or she still doesn't get it. Perhaps it's a problem with the language we are using. We want to convey a message, but it is not received.' This is a claim

political leaders frequently make about their opponents, that they understand only the language of force. The emphasis here remains on the readability or communicative power of the utterance, and violence is seen as continuous with discourse.

This is roughly how U.S. State Department official Strobe Talbott described the NATO air campaign over Kosovo in 1999, just as it was coming to an end: "I think Mr. Milosevic has made it clear in the way that he has inflicted four wars on the region in eight years that he both speaks in the language of force and understands the language of force, and NATO is now speaking to him very much in the language of force. But we believe that we can simultaneously proceed with diplomacy and that's what we are doing."

What the phrase seems to mean here is that this language -- unlike ordinary, diplomatic, political language -- can, indeed will, be understood by its receiver, and so it works to do what semiotics might call 'double-coding.' We say it in one code, political, and then in another, military.

But are these simply two different, parallel, languages? What is at stake is something more than speaking the (only) language of the other. The phrase wants to say something stronger: that the language of force actively and successfully delivers its message, imposes its meaning, if it can be called that, its meaning or its effects, without mediation, analysis, interpretation, or any passage through coding and decoding. It is effective; it takes hold and transforms its listener, precisely by not speaking. It leaves no room for

equivocation, confusion, misunderstanding; which is to say, it leaves no room for any others at all, for any back and forth, for exchange, for the delays and relays of a dialogue or a conversation. In leaving no room for interpretation, it seems to leave no room for meaning itself. The hermeneutic or cognitive aspect of language would be effaced in the delivery, and only force -- or the delivery itself -- is left. In a sense, the figure leaves no room, pure and simple: no space for exchange, for any deviation, and no time, no unfolding and no delay; it aspires to a pure present, to the presentation of the act and the fact, the fait accompli.

How to translate a language that bears within it the possibility of self-erasure, a discourse that -- in its escalation -- tends toward the absolute, toward the elimination of its interlocutor or even towards its own becoming-wild, crazy, reckless? That is a difficult question to answer, and there are certainly no rulebooks for the translation. There are also no clear guidelines on whether the translation or when the translation should stop -- and there is certainly an ethical risk in mistaking an annihilatory gesture for a discursive or political one. Knowing when things cannot get any worse is not easy, and maybe not even possible -- but what could be more important, especially if we prefer politics to violence?

But we can be sure that there is no language which needs no translation, not even the language of force. If it needs no translation, it is not a language. Jacques Ranciere has suggested that translation -- a radical translation, an active relation between and within languages, not the attempt to overcome language altogether -- is the event for which the

name politics ought to be reserved. Disagreement, misunderstanding, mésentente, discordant objects of reference between speakers, are for him different names for the political experience as such: neither an enforced consensus, nor the destruction of the political stage, but its active deconstruction and transformation.

The telos of consensus, agreement, or perfect understanding, is shared by some liberals and terrorists alike, as it turns out, and with it they secretly or not so secretly imagine is a world in which both politics and language might be transcended -- whether in the universality of human rights, the unilateralism of an imposition, or the simple disappearance of opacity, delay, difference, disagreement, and misunderstanding, into the clarity and directness of a self-erasing speech. That would be a good definition of (at least some kinds of) war or violence. If there is indeed a 'personal responsibility' at stake here, then it would be to continue to speak, to disagree, to insist on translation, in as many languages as possible.

NOTES

Azzam

Bin Laden

Zawahiri

UK White Paper (OBL quote)

Barthes, Mythologies

Butler, exoneration

Clausewitz

Ignatieff, Guardian and HR as Politics and Idolatry

Rieff, salon.com

Sassen, Guardian

TK Drift, Where are HR?

No Man's Land

Weizman, The Art of war, http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_art_of_war/