# Confounding Powers

Nearly a decade and a half after 9/11, the study of international politics has yet to address some of the most pressing issues raised by the attacks, most notably the relationships between Al Qaeda's international systemic origins and its international societal effects. This theoretically broad-ranging and empirically far-reaching study addresses that question and others, advancing the study of international politics into new historical settings while providing insights into pressing policy challenges. Looking at actors that depart from established structural and behavioral patterns provides opportunities to examine how those deviations help generate the norms and identities that constitute international society. Systematic examination of the Assassins, Mongols, and Barbary powers provides historical comparison and context to our contemporary struggle, while enriching and deepening our understanding of the systemic forces behind, and societal effects of, these confounding powers.

William J. Brenner is a national security analyst based in Washington, D.C. His work has been published in the journal *Security Studies* and the *European Journal of International Relations* (*EJIR*), where his co-authored article received the award for best article published in *EJIR* between 2007 and 2009 from the European Consortium for Political Research. He received his PhD from the Department of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University in 2008, and his work there on the effects of 9/11 on international relations theory was recognized in 2005 with the inaugural Graduate Student Paper Award given by the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

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## *Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda*

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107109452



First published 2016

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*
Brenner, William J., author.
Confounding powers : anarchy and international society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda / William J. Brenner.
Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, [2016] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
LCCN 2015031741 | ISBN 9781107109452 (alk. paper)
LCSH: International relations | Non-state actors (International relations) | Non-state actors (International relations) – Case studies. | Assassins (Ismailites) – History. | Mongols – History. | Pirates – Africa, North – History. | Qaida (Organization) – History.
LCC JZ4059 .B74 2016 | DDC 327.1–dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015031741

ISBN 978-1-107-10945-2 Hardback

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# Preface and acknowledgments

There are times when we experience events that confound expectations and rattle our cognitive foundations as they exceed anticipated bounds of possibility. The study of international politics has long grappled with the perils of possibilities, fashioning dangers into patterns by applying theory and engaging with history, making them more fathomable. September 11, 2001, was the first day of classes of my second year in the graduate program in political science at Johns Hopkins University. R.W. Apple captured, as much as one could, not only the enormity of the acts but also the confusion they generated, writing that "mere words were inadequate vessels to contain the sense of shock and horror that people felt. As Washington struggled to regain a sense of equilibrium, with warplanes and heavily armed helicopters overhead, past and present national security officials earnestly debated the possibility of a Congressional declaration of war – but against precisely whom, and in what exact circumstances?"[1] From that point on, my intellectual trajectory was set, and frustration with how international relations theory fell short in accounting for these seminal events drove this work from its conception.

While propelled by that dissatisfaction, further examination showed that some answers could be found in existing theory, and later contributions added to the tools we can use to try to make more sense of these ultimately senseless events. What became very clear is that none of those ideas or frameworks alone could suffice in explaining a phenomenon so rooted in the variety and complexity of the contemporary international system. Still clearer was the recognition that the modern international system offered few new insights into a transforming global landscape and a more expansive examination of world history would be essential.

Though this work was spurred by September 11, it has evolved to provide insights into a broader scope of international phenomena,

[1] R.W. Apple, "Nation Plunges into Fight with Enemy Hard to Identify," *New York Times*, September 12, 2001, A1.

demonstrating the creative power of events in advancing our knowledge and the field. Progress in the face of uncertainty requires both determination and humility given that we are in the midst of the change we seek to understand. Flexibility is also a necessity as stark departures from expected patterns make our thought not only a function of professional practice but a means to cope. "Nothing creates intellectual confidence like catastrophe," Leon Wieseltier wrote of the attacks. "After the mind breaks, it stiffens; in the aftermath of grief, it lets in only certainty."[2] Uncertainty is a driving force in this analysis and should also shape how we approach the study of international politics. The ability of theory to increase our capacity to navigate the complexity and ambiguity of international politics demands greater pliability, including enhanced collaboration and engagement within and outside of the field as well as a willingness to question our assumptions. We have come a long way since Apple's reaction to the attacks in understanding the events and actors that brought them about. Applying these lessons and fully focused on those goals, this book, hopefully, will prove to be a step toward further comprehension, and perhaps spark additions and corrections that move us closer to full understanding.

Many people were instrumental in helping me through what, despite its often thrilling spells, was at times a long, hard slog. This book is based on a much revised and condensed version of my doctoral dissertation. My dissertation advisers at Hopkins were Professors Steven David and Daniel Deudney. Beyond setting the fine example of balancing academic excellence and unceasing decency, Professor David made it clear that some of my initial theoretical arguments were too abstruse and required translation into more plain English. Professor Deudney also helped correct some of my early errors. My zeal in responding to the events and dissatisfaction with existing theory led to some fairly embarrassing efforts to rethink the theory more than a little too deeply. Many would have seen this failed attempt and dismissed any future potential. Instead, gently chiding my overreaching, he pointed out the errors and encouraged me to challenge but to do so more wisely. I hope that the ultimate results justify that confidence.

Beyond the guidance they provided, each set examples in their work that I have endeavored to follow. Professor David once faced the misfit of neorealist theory to the context of the developing world. What resulted was not falsification but theoretical innovation and progress. Professor Deudney taught me through his work that often the best way to critique a theory is to look at its founding assumptions. Extending those

[2] Leon Wieseltier, "The Catastrophist," *New York Times*, April 27, 2008.

assumptions to their logical ends can yield propositions that expand and improve rather than upend and discard inadequate theories. His work also demonstrated to me that the necessities of international politics generate possibilities in addition to limitations on world order. I have tried to apply these key lessons throughout my work.

I also had the good fortune to work with other major scholars. Participating in the Dartmouth Workshop on Hierarchy and Balance in International Systems was a remarkable opportunity for a graduate student. I am particularly grateful to Professors William Wohlforth, Stuart Kaufman, and Richard Little. Working on a project similar in methodology and emphasis on world history provided me with experiences and lessons that I applied throughout this study. I do not believe I would have had the confidence, or hubris, to attempt to tackle such a broad historical scope in this project without this formative experience.

Working on diverse and largely unfamiliar historical contexts also necessitated interactions with scholars outside of the field. I cannot attest to whether there is any tension between political science and other fields, as I witnessed none. Practically every (mostly "cold call") e-mail I sent to various scholars was met with a helpful and often lengthy response. For guidance concerning sources and other questions on the Mongols, a number of scholars were extremely helpful. The list is long and represents a "who's who" in that field, including Denis Sinor, Christopher Atwood, Timothy May, Hok-lam Chan, and Nicola Di Cosmo. Donald Wagner was very helpful in my initial investigation into the potential role of lapsed iron embargoes in the rise of the Mongols. This argument did not pan out but was engaging and interesting nonetheless. William Honeychurch introduced me to a much valued anthropological and archaeological perspective that influenced the early formation of my arguments. Regarding a still missing piece of the puzzle concerning Edmund Burke and the Assassins, both David Armitage and Richard Bourke were quite accommodating. Nathan Citino provided critical scholarship concerning the early attitudes of US administrations toward Islam during the Cold War. Of course, any errors and all of the views expressed in this book are mine alone.

I need to acknowledge the excellence of the Johns Hopkins University Library system. This study was very research intensive, often requiring obscure articles that would have been impossible to find and retrieve without the diligence and efficiency of the interlibrary loan and other library staff. As much as I tried, I could never stump them. Accessing a library in Baltimore while residing in Washington, D.C. presented a special challenge. Given the patience and professionalism of the library staffs at the Hopkins Milton S. Eisenhower and School of Advanced

International Studies libraries, I was able to overcome that boundary. The staffs at the Library of Congress, British Library, and George Camp Keiser Library at the Middle East Institute were also quite helpful.

Many thanks to John Haslam for recognizing the potential in my thesis, even as I stumbled through the first phases of the book proposal, and for his patience as the time for revision extended well past the normal. I would like to extend my gratitude to the readers whose mix of praise, incisive criticism, and concrete recommendations helped me push through to the later phases of publication. I also truly appreciate the hard work, patience, and professionalism of the editorial and production staffs at CUP in helping ensure the quality of the final product.

In my personal life I am grateful for the support of my parents, my mother Catherine and late father William Brenner, who have always been behind me in achieving my goals. Heartfelt thanks to the extended Schulman, Kaiserman, and Earn families for their kindness and support. I would like to express my thanks to my wife, Alissa, who has been my partner and dearest friend through what at times has been an ordeal. It was more than enough to ask you to deal with years of lonely dissertation work, only to then lose many more weekends together and take the extra share of work raising a child while I grinded out the revision. But you endured, making me able to do the same. Only your love and support made this possible and worthwhile. I look forward to making up for that lost time.

I found out that those efforts would result in this book while on a family picnic on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Our son, Dan, was running joyously pointing to the airplanes taking off and landing at the airport nearby. It later struck me and brought some relief that he never had to witness and live through the time that so shook us during and after the attacks. He will learn about them in part from books, and that this would be one of them is both deeply gratifying and humbling.