Introduction

Barbarians are back. Small groups, even individuals, administering little or no territory, with minimal resources but with a long reach, are unfortunately on the front pages of newspapers because of their destructive fury. They harass and attack states from the streets of London, Paris, and Barcelona to wider areas in the Middle East and elsewhere. They are not merely tragic and bloody nuisances but strategic actors that compete with existing states, forcing them to alter their behavior, their military postures, and even their domestic lifestyles. The various Islamist groups and individuals who over the past decade have presented in different ways a persistent threat to the United States and the West, as well as to states in other regions of the world, come immediately to mind. It would be certainly wrong to ignore the religious connotations of these groups, arising from the Islamic world, but it is equally dangerous to think that the conditions that are making these murderous groups possible are rooted exclusively in Islam. Barbarians are back because there are deep trends that bestow lethality, and thus a strategic role, to groups that do not need the vast administrative apparatus, the territory, and the skilled and rule-abiding citizenry of modern states.

Barbarians – small, highly mobile groups that often were not settled in a fixed place – are a recurrent reality in history. In the modern era, the nation state proved to be the most effective strategic actor, with barbarians receding from the geopolitical landscape. But the trends that made the modern state the preeminent actor may be changing, favoring a return of barbarians. The wide availability of lethal technology, inaccessible spaces that make state governance more arduous, and the appeal of nonmaterial objectives are some of these trends. The modern state will not disappear but will have to compete with peer rivals as well as with barbarians, a geostrategic conundrum that was well known to premodern polities such as ancient Rome.

The particular barbarian groups we face at this moment may be defeated but the trends that made them possible are harder, perhaps

impossible, to control. Barbarians are likely to be at our gates for a while. They will assault territorial polities and create conditions of such insecurity as to force the targeted states to alter their foreign policies and, in the long term, also their internal structure. For example, if the barbarian threat is decentralized, striking in surprising places but with a level of violence that affects only the immediate target (the street, the neighborhood or the small city rather than the entire state), the result may be that in order to be most effective security provision will have to become more decentralized. Competition and conflict are powerful forces that alter the way we organize ourselves, and thus the way states function.

If a return of barbarians proves to be enduring, studying premodern history and the security challenges it presented is too important to be left to historians. Students of security and politics should take a vigorous look at it. It is there, in fact, in that long period preceding the rise of the modern nation state, that barbarians in all their different permutations played important roles, competing with settled communities, assaulting empires, defeating legions, and altering how polities organized themselves to defend their own populations. There is a lot of value, therefore, in studying premodern history – and this book is driven by the premise that premodern history is an underexplored field for students of national security and international relations. We have secondhand experience of ancient history through thinkers such as Niccoló Machiavelli, who was well versed in Roman history and wrote for an audience that knew the difference between Lucius Junius Brutus and Marcus Junius Brutus. We have some sense of the Middle Ages through concepts such as "neomedievalism." And we receive an inkling of the violence of premodern times through frequent citations of Thucydides' "Melian Dialogue." But we rarely go back to these sources themselves, and with occasional exceptions, do not venture much past the intellectual safety of the nineteenth or twentieth century. We read Florentine commentaries on Titus Livius, but not Titus Livius himself; we are more familiar with Bismarck and Gorchakov than Julius Caesar and Vercingetorix.

I exaggerate perhaps, but not extravagantly. Studies on international relations are imbued with modern history, while the Middle Ages, Republican or Imperial Rome, or Ancient Greece usually serve only as vignettes to underline a continuity (for instance, the eternal quest for power) or divergence (such as, perhaps, the decrease in violence) with present times. It may certainly be that this lacuna is justified and appropriate. The state is seen as the main and often only actor on the world scene because it is the only one capable of mustering sufficient resources to provide security for its members and defend its interests. There are certainly good reasons to place such emphasis on the role of the state.

The history of the twentieth century is after all a prime example of a world characterized by conflicts between states (the two world wars, but also the wars in Korea, between Iran and Iraq, and most recently the US invasion of Iraq come to mind). Moreover, as the various wars of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century indicate, control over the state was the objective of the parties involved in these conflicts, and state-creation has been one of the main causes of war since 1945.[1] This argument can also be extended to the nineteenth century when Europe frequently witnessed national uprisings aimed at freeing ethnic groups from the political control of empires. Some, notably Germany and Italy, succeeded in establishing their own unified state in the second half of the nineteenth century, while most of the others had to wait until the end of World War I when the collapse of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires resulted in the creation of several new states in Central and Southeastern Europe. In brief, the state was the main tool of survival of groups and therefore also their primary political objective.

This focus on the role of states permeates also international relations theory, which is grounded in the study of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[2] Broadly speaking, there are two, quite different in their origins but complementary in their outcome, arguments in favor of focusing on modern history. The first, roughly overlapping with liberal theories, is that the world today is so fundamentally different that the more distant past is even less relevant than the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. The strategic actors, the norms of behavior, and the domestic and international institutional settings have few parallels in history, and in fact, are the result of a progressive improvement in how we behave in politics. Hence, the argument continues, the twenty-first century has rules of behavior that will find few similarities with those of the nineteenth century and even fewer with those of more distant periods. History is characterized after all by progress, and the farther back in history one peers, the less relevant that observation becomes. In fact, one of the most famous findings stemming from liberal theories, the "democratic peace argument,"

[1] Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61–81.

[2] Neorealist theory, in particular, stresses the state as the key, if not only, actor in the anarchical international system. Its arguments are often based on the post-1648 period, and the claim is that the theory should work particularly well in explaining the modern era. For a very critical perspective, see Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), 108–148. See also Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, "Polities Past and Present," *Millennium*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2008), 365–379. On the links between diplomatic history and international relations theory, see also Stephen H. Haber, David M. Kennedy and Stephen D. Krasner, "Brothers under the Skin: Diplomatic History and International Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), 34–43.

focuses on the past two centuries, based on the underlying premise that the novelty of domestic institutional arrangements – democracies, that is – has fundamentally altered international relations.[3] Progress, in brief, makes premodern history a not very useful source of strategic experience and political knowledge. The past is only a description of how things were, and not of how they are or will be.

The other argument, arising from within the Realist school of thought, begins from a very different assumption. History in this world-view is characterized by certain timeless, constant realities, and there is nothing fundamentally new in the political life of men.[4] Because of this continuity, studying ancient Rome, 1914, or the Cold War makes little difference from a practical point of view. All of these moments in history convey some eternal truths about strategic behavior and human motivations. As Hans Morgenthau put it, "human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece have endeavored to discover these laws."[5] But reference to ancient authors (often limited to Thucydides and his "Melian Dialogue" in particular) is by and large only a search for some sort of recognition of intellectual *gravitas*, rather than appreciation for the complexity of political realities and for the profound difference of international relations throughout history.[6] Albeit we can learn from all of these, the argument goes, we might as well choose the most approachable and the most vivid historical example. From a didactic point of view, more recent history is thus preferable.

These two arguments have some validity, even though they are based on different assumptions about history and the possibility of mankind's

[3] Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," Parts I and II, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Summer 1983), 205–235, and No. 4 (Fall 1983), 323–353; Michael Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 1986), 1151–1169.

[4] See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1993), 10. See also Markus Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800–1300: Communal Discourse and Conflictual Practices," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), 427–466; Stuart J. Kaufman, "The Fragmentation and Consolidation of International Systems," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Spring 1997), 173–208.

[5] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4.

[6] An interesting exception is Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean, Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). In this book, Eckstein uses Realist theory to explain the rise of Rome and the establishment of a "unipolar" or hegemonic system in the Mediterranean. It is worth noting that the author is a historian, not a political scientist, and one is left to wonder whether a book like his could have been written by an international relations theorist. Another exception, on the use of Thucydides, is Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides and Deterrence," *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April–June 2007), 163–188.

progress. The reason why the incorporation of premodern history into the study of international relations is so parsimonious may be that there is little advantage in dwelling on eras that are distant from us in time and sensibility. Studying premodern history may be appealing only because it is a trove of evidence unexplored by international relations and security studies scholars, presenting a vast open field for testing existing theories and arguments. There is abundant historical literature on premodern history, from Classical Greece to the Middle Ages, and one can fill an intellectual niche by mining it from an international relations perspective. This alone may be a solid reason to study premodern history, that long stretch of time before the seventeenth (or, as I will explain later, fifteenth) century.[7]

But there is more. Both views sketched above are correct, at least in part: There is both change and continuity in history. Premodern history is different from modern times (as the liberal view has it, stressing change in history), but its peculiar characteristics are recurrent and are again becoming more visible (as, at least in part, the realist view has it, stressing continuity in history). This, in a nutshell, is the underlying argument of this book and I will explain it in greater detail in the chapters to come. Here, I want to point out a reason for studying premodern history, stemming from this pithy statement of my argument. If correct, this argument points to the possibility that some strategic realities and actors, which are particular to premodern history, may be making a resurgence. But we are intellectually handicapped because our perspective is thoroughly molded by modern history. For instance, international relations theories have a hard time explaining, among others, the "Achaean League, the Hanseatic League, the Swiss Confederation, the Holy Roman Empire, the Iroquois Confederation, the Concert of Europe,

[7] An exception to this avoidance of ancient history is the literature on "new medievalism," started in part by Hedley Bull. The core argument is that the sovereignty of states is being challenged by multiple actors, from larger ones (e.g. the European Union) to smaller ones (e.g. cities and private companies), resulting in overlapping authorities and diluted sovereignty. This leads to a gradual return to the "new Middle Ages," where the particular, exclusive, and often national identities and authorities compete with several other sources of authority and power. The argument I present in this book is slightly different, however. The decline of the modern state is often portrayed in the "new medievalism" literature as the result of globalization and economic forces, which weaken the power of the state to influence its political and economic fate within its borders. As I see it, the state is not necessarily weakening – indeed, in many aspects it is strengthening and its authority becoming more centralized, even economically in light of the current recession – but is being challenged and attacked by non-state groups. Moreover, the rise of these groups is only in part due to economic trends of globalization. It is also caused, as I will discuss later, by the expansion of uncontrolled spaces, the revival of religious extremism, and the diffusion of technology. See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995).

and the early United States."[8] Barbarians are another reality to add to this list. We think by analogies and our analyses of, as well as responses to, security challenges are informed by our knowledge of the past. Faced by an array of new strategic actors, we lack analogies to many current strategic challenges that have been rare in the past two or three centuries.

Our approach to international relations is a modern one: a modern theory about modern strategic realities. At the basis of this modern theory, or schools of thoughts as there is clearly no single theory of international relations, is the belief that the state – the modern nation state, territorially delimited, hierarchically organized, and in possession of the legitimate and monopolistic use of force – is the principal actor. This belief is an outcome of a deeper intellectual revolution that separates premodern from modern political thought, a break characterized in large measure by a different understanding of the origins of political order. In a very brief and necessarily imperfect summation, it can be said that the modern view puts political order as a willful and forceful creation of man. This order arises within or through a state that organizes under a common power an otherwise clashing rabble of individuals. Hobbes and his Leviathan are a case in point. The premodern, classical view of political order is less state-centric, and political order is an outcome of long, natural developments of which politics and the state are only a reflection. There are many different sources of political order, starting from the family and friendship, that precede the state, and upon which the state is founded. In fact, the collapse or degeneration of these primary societal groups leads to state failure: "sons killed their fathers," as Thucydides recounts in this description of Corcyra's Civil War, and this was a clear symptom that the city in question was politically dead.[9] For premodern thought the state is the outcome, not the cause, of social order. This passage from premodern to modern thought marks a big intellectual break, a revolution of thought, that cannot but have also an impact on how we understand international relations. In the passage to modernity we gained a certain elegance and parsimony by focusing on the state, but we lost also an appreciation for the multiplicity of political actors that provide social cohesion (or disruption) and are strategic actors in international relations.

[8] Daniel H. Deudney, "The Philadelphian System: Sovereignty, Arms Control, and Balance of Power in the American States-Union, Circa 1787–1861," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Spring, 1995), 193. See also, William Wohlforth et al., "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2007), 155–185; S. Kaufman, R. Little and W. Wohlforth, eds., *Balance of Power in World History* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2007).

[9] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. by Robert B. Strassler (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 3.81, 199.

The rise of the modern state as the most effective provider of security and unity, and its gradual and apparently relentless expansion to every corner of the world, are good reasons why we favor this modern approach to international relations. But what if the security conditions were changing and the modern state were only one of the many methods of societal organization and strategic behavior? I do not argue that the modern state is in decline, as it has been suggested with some recurrence from a variety of perspectives over the past few decades, but only that it may no longer be the only strategic actor on the world scene. And even more narrowly, here I simply want to point out that it behooves us to study premodern history as a long period in human history in which there were multiple, often overlapping, sources of political order and, consequently, a multilayered nature of international politics.

The problem with ignoring ancient history is that if we look at the past three hundred years or so, characterized by competition between well-formed and clearly defined states, it is difficult to find analogies that are appropriate to describe the situation currently facing the United States. There are several large trends – namely, the growing separation between industrial resources and military capability, the diminishing importance of exclusive territorial control necessary to be a strategic actor in international relations, the rise of sources of authority and allegiance alternative to the state, and the reemergence of nonnegotiable objectives – that are altering the strategic landscape of the world, making it under certain aspects similar to that of ancient history. These are only trends and not outcomes, and thus may not result in lasting and comprehensive changes. But they are also outside the control of individual states or great powers, and as such they cannot be stopped or diverted.

At a minimum, these "ancient" traits will coexist with more "modern" features of international relations (e.g. the territorial nature of states, the unmatched power of states to muster resources, and the ability of states to engage in diplomacy) resulting in an added layer of complexity to international relations. While obviously the world will not revert to the Middle Ages or ancient Roman times, some of its features will resemble those periods.

The results of these trends are by no means certain, but broadly speaking there are two sets of challenges that we will continue to face in the future – challenges that are more common in ancient than modern history. First, there is a growing array of strategic actors, other than states, that will continue to oppose US interests. Second, the objectives pursued by them will not be easily amenable to political settlements, increasing the level of violence and instability in the world. Thus, our perspective and our strategies are thoroughly modern but the realities that confront us are

increasingly less so.[10] It is important to dust off our knowledge of ancient history because it may give us a better sense of the nature of the threats and the most effective strategies to deal with them.

To be clear, this book cannot fill the lacuna of historical knowledge, nor does it propose a grand new model of international relations. It is not a history of barbarians, nor does it aspire to offer a theory of barbarian tribes and their interactions with settled communities. I do not recount every, or even a few in-depth cases, of interactions and conflicts between barbarians and empires. This is the proper role of historians, who have much greater knowledge and skills to embark, as many have done and to whom we are indebted, on this intellectual pursuit. The catalogue of the violence, and of the moments of cooperation and even peace, between these two sets of strategic actors – the nomadic and the settled, the uncivilized and the civilized, the mobile tribe and the sedentary cities, the barbarians and the empire – is long, and it has seen a pause only in more recent, modern times.

Rather, the book suggests that premodern history can be of use to those who study national security and describes the conditions that lead to the rise of barbarians, the challenges they present, and the effect they may have on the targeted states.

Barbarians

To justify the study of premodern history may be less necessary than a preventive defense of the term "barbarian," a term that can raise criticism from many fronts. One reproach is that it carries denigrating connotations of cultural inferiority and barbaric behavior, traits that after all are not unique to non-state groupings. Consequently, it is seen less as an analytical concept than as a slur. But in its simplest usage, "barbarian" referred to groups that spoke a different, incomprehensible language. It was not necessarily an insult but an all-encompassing description of foreign groups. And the word "barbarian" points more to the user of this term, rather than the subject defined by it: It shows the inability to understand the groups in question. First and foremost, therefore, it is a term of intellectual frustration, of the difficulty of comprehending the

[10] There are, of course, some exceptions. See, for instance, John Gerard Ruggie, "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (January 1983), 261–285; Myron Weiner, "Security, Stability, and International Migration," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Winter 1993), 91–126; Rey Koslowski, "Human Migration and the Conceptualization of Pre-Modern World Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), 375–399. There are also more recent studies that use ancient history to shed light on current security challenges. See, for example, Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Winter 2006/07), 41–73.

rival. While in Ancient Greece this inability may have been limited to the linguistic realm, now it points to a larger incomprehension: The groups may be quite understandable linguistically, but their motivations, their goals, the foundations of their strength and weakness, and their very reason to exist remain somewhat incomprehensible. They are barbarians because they remain poorly understood and represent an intellectual challenge; we are baffled by them and we do not understand them. In strategy one must understand the interlocutor, the rival who through actions and words is communicating something that calls for a response. The term "barbarian" meant that the user of it did not fully understand his strategic interlocutor, the enemy.

A related criticism of the term "barbarian" is that it is too broad, encompassing a wide variety of groups ranging from small nomadic tribes to large and semi-settled groups that overran empires. Throughout premodern history, some barbarians merely harassed imperial armies or preyed on commerce along poorly defended roads, while others fielded large armies that in some cases trampled over the forces of well-established states or empires. The catchall nature of the term, in other words, seems to glaze over crucial differences and consequently could be considered as of little analytical use. But there are also important commonalities among these groups, such as high mobility and less hierarchical structures, that merit a single term. More recently, there have been several terms struggling to define these strategic actors – from "terrorists" and "non-state violent groups" to "networks" or "acephalic groups." All of these descriptive phrases have their own benefits, but there is no single term that embraces all of these groups or the broad challenges they produce. Using the old word of "barbarians" is appropriate. It is akin to the word "polity," which does not take into account wide differences in geographic size, domestic regime, economic independence, military power, or tactical preferences among territorial polities, but which nevertheless is useful in identifying a particular category of strategic actors.

A critic may point out that "barbarians" may apply to ancient groups, but modern stateless terrorist organizations are different: The latter often are inside targeted states, living in the *banlieus* and not on the other side of an imperial frontier. Other differences also are visible, such as the greater lethality of today's small groups. Differences abound, of course. But there are also parallels, in particular in the nature of the threat ancient and modern barbarians present: The threat is localized, individually small, and geographically diffused, unlike that of mass armies of other industrial states marching across borders. Barbarians raid but rarely invade; they plunder, rather than control territory; they terrorize, rather than administer populations.

I do not want to suggest that, say, modern Islamist terrorists are exactly like the Huns or the Comanches. There are indeed many differences among all of these groups, and scholars ought to focus on the characteristics particular to these groups. And academic efforts to comprehend today's strategic landscape are very vibrant, using a range of methods from quantitative to in-depth studies of modern-day cases, and for the most part do not rely on the study of ancient history.[11] The fact that few security studies students look at ancient history may be, therefore, quite justified.[12] But I think that we lose a lot of richness by ignoring parallels with premodern history. By itself, the study of ancient history will not generate revolutionary new theories of asymmetric conflicts, balance of power, or deterrence in a polynuclear world. However, it can help us understand current strategic challenges by underlying certain characteristics of international relations, such as a decreased effectiveness of diplomacy and deterrence, that were salient in premodern times and that may recur in the future.

Finally, I use the term "barbarians" with full cognizance that these groups in the past, as today, were violent and destructive. They destroyed more than they built. They plundered more than they cultivated. They were more interested in blood than law. Barbarians were barbaric. Nothing indicates that the future will be different.

The book begins with an analysis of the conditions, such as wide availability of lethal technology and the existence of difficult-to-reach geographic spaces, under which barbarians prosper. Chapter 2 then describes the challenges of competing and fighting with barbarians, focusing on the difficulties of diplomacy and deterrence as well as on the effectiveness of using military force against them. I then move in Chapter 3 to consider the possibility of a return of barbarians and of features that characterized premodern history. In the rest of the book

[11] For instance, the literature on radical Islamic terrorism has been growing. See Oliver Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Giles Keppel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003); Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2006). There is also a vast literature studying the motivations of terrorists writ large, not limited to the jihadist kind. See, for instance, Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006); Alan Krueger, *What Makes a Terrorist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[12] There are, of course, exceptions. See Ruggie, "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity"; Weiner, "Security, Stability, and International Migration"; Koslowski, "Human Migration"; Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective"; Victor Davis Hanson, ed., *Makers of Ancient History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), in particular the introduction.

I examine the effect that rivalry with barbarians has on the targeted polity and how that polity may respond to the threat. In Chapter 4 I examine how ancient polities, the Roman Empire in particular, have experienced a process of decentralization when the barbarians were assaulting on the frontier. I continue the description in Chapter 5 by looking at how three Roman individuals dealt with the barbarian menace and how they related to the central authorities of the empire. Finally, in Chapter 6 I examine a few other strategies adopted by states that were threatened by barbarian groups.