

International Terrorism and the “War on Terror”

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Background of Present Terrorism and its Consequences

It is well known by now that Osama Bin Laden had relationships with top intelligence officials of the countries that helped expel the Soviet occupying army from Afghanistan after the decade-long war. The US and Saudi governments spent billions of dollars each on that effort, funnelling the money and supplies through Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies to the Afghan mujahedin, including Osama Bin Laden. All this, however, was not without side effects, as in doing so, perhaps inadvertently or by a deeper design the stage was set for the 11 September 2001 attacks. The *Los Angeles Times* has pieced together this information from the statements of several senior members of the 11 September 2001 commission and the US counter terrorism officials. It is surmised that, by cutting deals with the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden, these two countries allowed the Al Qaeda terrorist network to flourish. This claim of cutting deal, either out of sympathy with or to protect themselves from attack, has been made, in a lawsuit that has been filed by the families of 11 September 2001 victims against Saudi Arabia.

The financial aid to the Taliban and other assistance, by two of the most important allies of the United States in its “War on Terror” dates back to 1996, and appear to have shielded them from Al Qaeda attacks within their own borders until long after the 2001 strikes, the commission members and officials said in interviews. “That does appear to have been the arrangement,” said one senior member of the commission staff.¹

It is further reported by the paper, that by not cracking down on Osama Bin Laden, these countries undermined significantly the

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worldwide efforts on the "War on Terror", as Osama Bin Laden got the haven he needed to train thousands of his followers. It is believed that the governments' funding of his Taliban protectors enabled Osama Bin Laden to withstand international pressure and expand his operations into a global network that could carry out the 11 September 2001 attacks. Saudi Arabia provided funds and equipment to the Taliban and probably directly to Osama Bin Laden, and did not interfere with Al Qaeda's efforts to raise money, recruit and train operatives, and establish cells throughout the kingdom. The paper also reported that Pakistan, provided even more direct assistance. Its military and intelligence agencies often coordinated efforts with both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Consequently the Al Qaeda's network of cells got deeply embedded into the social and religious fabric of these countries, enabling the organisation to survive the US-led demolition of its headquarters in Afghanistan in 2001, to regroup and to launch new waves of attacks. However, once Pakistan launched comprehensive attacks against their domestic Al Qaeda cells followed by Saudi Arabia in 2003, both these countries became victims of terrorist attacks. It is privately acknowledged in both countries that it will now be extremely difficult to eliminate the roots of Al Qaeda fund raising, recruiting and training structure.

Historical Backdrop

It will be unfair to summarily comment on Saudi Arabia and Pakistan cutting a deal or compromising with the militants, without understanding the enormity of the situation, and the problems being faced by these countries in weaning their people away from the Islamists. Sadly, their attempts have not met with great success so far, specially in Saudi Arabia. *Time* magazine of 13 September 2004 says, "Since about 1750, when Mohammed Bin Saud struck an alliance with the puritanical Islamic preacher Abdul Wahhab, the Kingdom's government has effectively been joined at the hip with the austere, deeply conservative brand of Islam known as Wahhabism. Modern day oil riches, as well as the al Saud family's desire to remain in power, mean that Wahhabi clerics have had both the freedom and the funds to spread their intolerant and anti-Semitic creed with impunity, pouring millions into the establishment

of Wahhabi schools and mosques around the world". The *Time* also carries a telling story of Crown Prince Abdullah's plan to reform, starting with country's first municipal elections, facing a virtual revolt led by the conservative Interior Minister, Prince Nayef Bin Abdul Aziz, third in line to the Saudi throne. A Saudi novelist and newspaper columnist Turki al-Hamad is quoted on stalling of reforms, "If you have a society drapped with religion, of course you will reach this point". In Pakistan the same *Time* issue has quoted the consequences of the war on terror, in a peculiar domestic politics twist, resulting in, "conservative religious parties gaining partial control of two (..out of four..) provinces, Northwest Frontier and Baluchistan, to which many Taliban and Al Qaeda fled from Afghanistan". The *Time* further says, President General Musharraf has survived three assassination attempts and the magazine, gives a telling quote from Abdul Noor aged 31 years, a teacher at Islamabad's largest religious school, "It is the ego of the West that is responsible for all this fighting. We do not want to interfere in the affairs of America or the West. We just want to live our own lives. But we are not being allowed to".

Historically it will be sufficient to recall that from the year 632 to 1400 AD was a period of various sects of Islam to find their roots. It is only the period from 1400 to 1700 when Ottoman Turkish Empire flourished and introduced religious bureaucracy. Turkey retreated from its high point of rule in Europe and got out of the old mould through the efforts of the great reformist and visionary Kamal Ataturk, but the dream of the high point remained in the minds of many. There are many other intertwined narratives but for the purpose of understanding the present rise of the political desire to have their own rule, it will be sufficient to follow the main events since 1928 when *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, or the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was founded by Hassan al-Bana in Egypt. The Brotherhood could not find political expression for long since the period till the 1950s and 1960s belonged to the Arab nationalists specially in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Arab nationalist movement over extended itself ignoring the strength of ethnic forces and the resilience of the regimes in the region.

After the Islamic revolution that toppled the Shah of Iran in 1979, Islamist movement became a significant force at the expense of secular nationalist, liberal leftist and pan-Arabist political movements. The increasing importance of Islamism may explain why other political actors, whether in power or in opposition, borrowed Islamist vocabulary and appropriated many of its themes. The extensive use of Islamists terms by avowed Arab nationalist since the Gulf conflict of 1990-91 illustrates this trend clearly.² King Hassan's political identification as *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful) in Morocco; and King Fahd's status as *Khadim al-Haramyn al-Sharifayn* (Custodian of the Holy Places) in Saudi Arabia and styling of Mr Sadat as *al-Rais al-Mu'min* (the believing President) were all attempts to use Islamic symbols and concepts to increase their own political legitimacy.

The idea that Islam is the solution to political, social and economic problems became more popular since the 1970s in the light of the policy failures and declining legitimacy of many Arab regimes. Highly uneven development, rapid urbanisation and accelerated economic liberalisation increased social tensions and dislocation. State legitimacy declined into protracted crisis and, in an atmosphere conducive to protest movements, many Islamist groups found a receptive social base.³

Arab defeats at the hands of Israel and the 'oil revolution' of the 1970s created an atmosphere conducive to Islamist growth. The quadrupling of the oil prices after the 1973 Arab-Israel war gave Islamists access to significant resources.⁴ In the 1970s, the so called "Petro-Islamic" countries such as Saudi Arabia were on surprisingly good terms with the MB and directly supported Islamic groups and publications. They also gave financial assistance to other governments contingent on their toleration of Islamic groups backed by oil power. However, it was not only the state support but affluent individuals and families who got rich through oil boom and gave support to the Islamist groups. Most of the group were based in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chechnya. Prominent amongst them was Osama Bin Laden's family estimated to be \$ five billion worth.

This sudden spurt in the ability of the Islamists alerted the regimes in the region who got together to tackle the problem of terrorism, despite their many political differences. Notable among these efforts were the meetings in 1992 in Mauritania and in 1997 in Tunisia through the forum of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or bilaterally and multilaterally through smaller groupings of the affected regimes. Notably, Sudan stayed away from the GCC efforts.

The intervening time between 1970 and 1990 was also the period of great Iran uprising in 1979. Interestingly, notes James Piscatori, "Muslim statesmen, like all statesmen, are guided more by cold calculations of national interests than by the passionate commitment to ideological values".⁵ Cold calculations are where state interests, rather than ideological imperatives lie, shaped the Iranian policy towards the two crucial regional issues: the 1990-91 Gulf conflict; and Post-Soviet Central Asia.⁶

Rise of Osama Bin Laden

It is important to note about the rise of Osama Bin Laden. He was not content with providing financial assistance to the Islamists and in the 1980s left Saudi Arabia with thousands of his followers to end the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In 1988-89 when the Soviet occupation ended he paid for many fighters to leave Afghanistan and Pakistan. He himself settled down in Sudan and with the revenue earned from his business ventures there, continued to support Algerian, Egyptian, Palestinian and reportedly Saudi radical Islamists.⁷ There are also reports that Osama Bin Laden was able to raise money from businessmen in the Gulf particularly from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Labour migration became another source of funds for the Islamists.

All these activities did not go totally unnoticed particularly the attempts to assassinate Mr Mubarak in June 1995. Egypt pressurised Sudan to hand over the Islamists responsible for the 1995 attempt. Saudi Arabia stripped Osama Bin Laden of the Saudi citizenship in 1994 and improved relations with Sudan contingent on expelling of Osama Bin Laden from Sudan.

It is important to note that Osama Bin Laden and his Islamist followers fighting in Afghanistan realised that the USA could not afford to leave control of Afghanistan unchallenged. Ironically on its part the US also was unwilling to confront the Soviets directly, to obviate the possibility of getting involved in an open ended conflict, which could have led to a Vietnam type of situation bereft of public support. The US, therefore, was looking for a force to sponsor that could make the costs of staying unacceptable to the Soviets.

The Islamists came forward to foot the bill, more so when even their own states like Egypt, Jordan and Libya were ready to encourage their members to volunteer for the Afghanistan resistance, fully aware that part of their funding and intelligence would come from the USA. Everyone wanted these people to be fighting and risking their lives to serve their purpose and no one was sorry, if they got killed, so long as they stayed away and did not bother anyone. On their part the Islamists saw in all this an opportunity to get to know and use the latest military weaponry, intelligence, surveillance and communication assets of the superpower. The opportunity was too attractive for the Islamists to miss and they decided to put their ideological hostility for the US on hold in favour of the gains for their future plans.

This was too good to be true, after their perceived successes in 1984, where they believed they drove the US and the Israel out from most of Lebanon. On the same lines the Islamists were glad to have an opportunity to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan. In the end everyone except the Soviets claimed a victory as the USA got the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan at practically no human costs to themselves and the Arab states got rid of the Islamists from their countries. No one at that time thought, that it was the Islamists, who would have the last laugh, by building themselves into a strong well knit battle tested force, capable of taking on their own Arab regimes on their own and the US, anywhere in the world. Their return to their countries led to an escalation in Islamist attacks inflicting significant losses.⁸

Political Islam and Terrorism

From 1980 onwards Islamist movement kept on gaining momentum mostly based on events in Iran and Afghanistan. Truck bombing of the World Trade Centre inspired by Sheikh Omar Abdel Rehman was kind of an operational model being perfected for the more spectacular 11 September 2001 attack. More importantly the old paradigm was changing. The Islamists now did not care for the number of people dying so long as there were large numbers of people watching. They were no longer necessarily counting on the support of the people, or afraid of losing it, like in the traditional 'fish in water' model of terrorism. Two more bomb blasts followed in Saudi Arabia : first in Riyadh in November 1995 and later Khobar Towers in Dhahran in June 1996. Attack on the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 followed by the attack on the USS *Cole* in October 2000 showed how much they hated the USA, with whom they had tactically cooperated against the Soviets in Afghanistan earlier.

The scale of this unfolding drama being very large on the world stage, there appeared many plots woven in it. Sensing the condition right, Mr Arafat launched his "Second Intifadah" in Palestine. The Afghanistan story ran side by side in the background and kept the pot of international terrorism on the boil. Osama Bin Laden, having lost his Saudi citizenship and driven out of Sudan took personal charge of events in Afghanistan, after arriving there in 1996. He gave a TV interview on killing of Black Hawk soldiers in Somalia in 1997 and felt confident to issue a fatwa against the Americans in 1998. The USA had already started counting him as their enemy number one, since the attacks on the embassies. The US negotiated unsuccessfully to get hold of him throughout 2000 and 2001.

To get a flavour of the events at that time in Afghanistan, one needs to recall Tim Judith's account given in *The Taliban Papers*, based on the correspondence that became available after the fall of Kabul. He wrote, "Pakistan found itself in an invidious position, purveying what amounted to death threats to Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader, from the US administration, unless he

handed over Osama Bin Laden. Far from being intimidated, Mullah Omar brushed these aside; indeed he responded in kind, personally threatening Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan leader, with dire consequences unless he introduced a Taliban-style regime in Pakistan...debates raged at the heart of its foreign-policy establishment as it became increasingly clear to Pakistani officials that the Taliban were out of control...there was a sense a mounting panic amongst some officials about the unfolding course of events".⁹

Some questions beg an answer at this stage. Is the "Islamist Revolution" personality driven, if so, who is running it and what are its aims and objectives? Or is it event driven, running by itself based on local movements, by local leaders who decide the pace and direction based on the obligation of the true believers to follow the Islamic law *Sharia*? Is the *Sharia* to be implemented in its entirety or are local deviations possible, for example to accommodate a milder form of Islam being followed in Southeast Asia? Lastly, will the "Islamist Revolution" or discontent be assuaged by socio-economic reforms? Will the deviation from the "golden age" paradigm tantamount to *Jahiliyya*, or pre-Islamic ignorance?

The evidence so far portrays different directions. The form of Islam being followed in Saudi Arabia is patently different from the one followed in Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Islam in Indonesia incorporates traditional mysticism and even animism. Al Qaeda has no territorial ambitions but Southeast Asia based *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) does have territorial ambitions. All the same, Al Qaeda provided funding for Bali and Jakarta's JW Marriott hotel bombings in Indonesia.

After the Maoist influenced Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) exhausted itself, the fight in the Philippines was taken over by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of which *Abu Sayyaf* terrorists are a splinter group. MILF denies any link with Al Qaeda but has admitted receiving "foreign visitors". The Philippine intelligence however, connects Ramzi Yousef of 1993 World Trade Centre car bombing fame, with training of *Abu Sayyaf*. On one hand, Osama Bin Laden says Muslims must not fight Muslims but

in the Islamic states that is exactly what has been happening all the time. The September 2004 car bombing in central Jakarta in Indonesia killed nine people and injured 182. Asia Director of International Crisis Group (ICG) says, "They knew there would be Indonesian victims, but they did not care". The old paradigm of "many watching not many killed" does not hold good anymore. All this has put pressure on the Islamic states to compromise. It has also affected the choice, of the electorates in the elections and ushered in introduction of Islamic laws to various degrees. But, there still are some, who are undeterred, even after narrowly surviving several assassination attempts, like General Musharraf of Pakistan, who in a recent interview, to *Time* on attacks on Al Qaeda said, "And I am prepared to make any sacrifice for Pakistan to do this".¹⁰

Who is the real enemy of the Islamists? Is it poverty and the governments who are responsible for it? Is it all things Western and the USA? Will moderate Islam survive? Will there be separation between religion and politics? Will the democratically elected governments, like the one in Dhaka and the Islamic movement in Malaysia continue to flirt with the fundamentalists? Or will the path being shown by 70 per cent urban Iranians, who rejected the restrictive elections by the Mullahs be followed? They now throng to listen to the debates in the University by progressive young thinkers on "Transition to Democracy". Will the USA in its zeal to clamp on nuclear concerns in Iran turn this nascent movement towards democracy? War in Iraq is certainly not helping matters, if anything, it is fuelling the drive of the Islamists.

Attitudes Towards the 'War on Terror' and the Approaches

There are three more issues, we need to deal with, namely the attitude of Islamists towards the West, the Arab-Israeli conflict and approach of the Western powers. Firstly, the Islamists and the Arab regimes according to Ibrahim A Karawan "pay close attention to Western attitudes and actions towards Islamism. Most Arab regimes have close ties with one or more Western powers. While it is in the regime's interest to retain Western economic, military and political support, their Islamist rivals want to end or

reduce it. Militant Islamists aim to accomplish this by striking at Western targets (companies, tourists and military sites)". In fact that is exactly what they did in tune with their avowed policy to hurt the West by striking at the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001.

The second issue is of the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Not many Western analysts believe the settling of this conflict will end Islamist militancy. The belief is "The conflict did not make Islamist movements, and peace will not break them".¹¹ The only concern of the West appears to obviate surprises of the kind they had, in the fall of the Shah of Iran and the 11 September 2001 attack. Most Western policies towards Arab world, sadly have been stressing preserving of political stability rather than expanding democracy. Neither the regimes nor the Islamists believed in liberal democracy. From a Western perspective, present situation is basically of confrontation between friendly authoritarian rulers and not so friendly authoritarian Islamist challengers or the terrorists as we call them now. We forget that as there is no monolithic Islam, similarly there is no unified Western response. The USA has, however, made it quite clear right from the beginning, "if you are not with us you are against us". But that is not the case with other Western powers who have the baggage of the colonial period to carry and have got their domestic agenda of stopping immigration from the Islamist world mixed up with their foreign policy overtures.

Lastly we have the question of which approach should be followed. According to Ibrahim A Karawan, two conflicting approaches have divided the Western world : the confrontational and the accommodational. The confrontational approach starts from the premise that Western and Islamic values are irreconcilable. Islamist pose a threat to the West because the cultural traits of Muslim societies make them fundamentally incompatible with core Western notions such as democracy and modernity - a 'clash of civilisations'. Islamists are primarily driven by their desire for power and act in accordance with their ideological beliefs. Islamists should not be regarded as religious activists engaged in politics under compelling conditions of poverty. Rather, they are political activists who express their pursuits of power in religious terms.¹²

The accommodational approach, conversely, has its roots in the increasing appeal and activism of Islamist movements in their social and economic surroundings. Widespread despair among the poor has contributed most to the resurgence of Islamist movements, which act primarily as vehicles for protest against existing regimes. Thus, dealing successfully with Islamist movement necessitates reducing the economic deprivation, social tensions and political corruption that are their breeding grounds. This idea was being talked about in the initial stages after the 11 September 2001 attacks in describing the policy of draining out the swamps that breed the terrorists. Somehow along the way in all the noise of the "War on Terror", this idea got lost.

Luckily, this idea appears to have tentatively surfaced again, in the policies being followed in Pakistan now. According to the *Time* magazine of 13 September 2004, "The US and other international donors have pumped millions of dollars in an effort to draw out students from Saudi-funded schools". There is some disenchantment expressed in the report, but we must understand that social changes take time to take effect and also they need the right climate which can neither be effective at once and nor can they be effective through guns or any other such pressure.

There are different wars being fought against terrorism. Al Qaeda's primary concern is the Americans and their assets. Similarly other groups seem to have their very own local objectives and targets with an overarching loose connection of sorts. "You help me, when you can, I will help you, when I can. No questions asked, so long you do not bother my outfit". They all dip in the internationally organised crime communication and money laundering channels including the fluid currency of drugs or arms and the like.

It thus appears that a large gap exists in how the Americans and the Europeans look at the "War on Terror". It is reported that the US has formed 56 joint task forces which bring together federal, state and local agencies to prevent terrorism and 93 anti-terrorism task forces that bring together communication agencies. Raja

Menon feels that while "the US works on consequences, the European works on probabilities". We all know that Muslims constitute four per cent of the population (15 million) of the European Union (EU), in the US they number six million or just about two per cent of the population.

It is just as well that these measures have been taken since the figures show that attacks against the US targets increased from about 20 per cent in 1993 to almost 50 per cent in 2000. There was also evidence of a more global character to terrorist networks, including a gradual shift from the Middle East to Central Asia, South Asia, the Balkans and the Trans-Caucas. Throughout the world, the average number of casualties per incident were also increasing.¹³

However, for the terrorists to cause damage, their message must resonate with a broad audience of supporters, since the foundation of a threat arises not so much from any military capability but from sympathisers who are essential for their survival. Terrorists have no power without political and financial support. It is, therefore, important that these are targeted in a systematic manner. Money laundering has come down but it still is prevalent and needs international support for curtailing it and ultimately ending it.

The USA is undoubtedly the leader in the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), but it has to become a leader in the Revolution in Diplomatic and the Economic Affairs (RDA and REA). Increased foreign assistance to politically volatile areas like Central Asia, better long-term coordination of intelligence with allies and countries with similar value system, more cooperation in international criminal laws enforcement, better public diplomacy, improved language capability, better education in regional studies and active long-term coalition building are the measures suggested by Audrey Kurth Cronin.¹⁴

The "War on Terror" has to be fought on many fronts and most of them have to be other than military. Internationally we need to encourage organisations like the International Pugwash

for the simple reason that the greatest danger of terrorism arises from the weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This threat gets further compounded by collaboration between state and the non-state actors. Some argue, it is not likely that non-state actors may possess the WMD because the technologies of such high level are unlikely to be made available to the terrorists. However, they miss the whole point that there have been 18 incidents of smuggling of the enriched uranium or plutonium in the decade from 1993 to 2003. Also since some states in their zeal to acquire the nuclear capability at any cost do employ individual scientists with enormous powers to act alone. There is always a possibility of such individuals going astray for ideological reasons and making contacts with the non-state actors. Faith they say has no reason or rationale.¹⁵

The threat is two fold. Firstly, terrorists may take over a state having nuclear weapons. This possibility cannot be ruled out in a military state. Such states have great reliance on the militants, whose support base could extend to a point that they would be able to challenge the state, due their presence in the military itself. Secondly, the supporters of terrorism as a policy tool in a nuclear state, due reasons of domestic conflict, may covertly help the terrorists to acquire fissile material for making a crude dirty bomb. There is clearly a need to have international arrangements in place to monitor illegal transfer of technology, weapon systems and sub-systems including delivery systems and their parts.

We also need to address this big issue of inequalities in the world order, so that some countries do not become the 'wreckage of globalisation', which is giving rise to a feeling of frustration in some parts of the world. In this age of interdependence developing countries need "space to develop" so that no swamps are created for the terrorists to breed. The developed countries particularly the US must share the burden of producing an egalitarian and sustainable pattern of global resource consumption. Developing countries need cheap and plentiful access to resources in order to develop. Developed countries, led by the US, appear to be seeking binding global commitments that would require all countries to alter their consumption pattern simultaneously, thus locking in

current inequalities in absolute consumption as well as denying the developing countries through "green imperialism", the consumption patterns that the developed countries historically utilised to develop and modernise.¹⁶

In the end, it all comes down to choosing between power or the principles. This is an age-old conflict in which the nation states generally put their faith in the "Principle of Power" whereas human beings have always relied on the "Power of Principles". The old rules that permitted power to triumph over the principles have trapped the world in a vicious cycle of conflicts. The challenge before us is to have the courage to find new ways to break out of this cycle. We should also not allow today's solutions to become tomorrow's problems.

Once you are deeply involved, then you tend to lose objectivity. At the same time, if you are totally uninvolved you tend to lose the connectivity with reality. Therefore, the answer has to come from the progressive countries, particularly those who are closely involved and who do not want to see the world degenerate into a devastating confrontation. There are no easy ways to find the answers but may be a pointer is hidden in a question some where, that a Malaysian student asked President, General Musharraf in 2003, at the Royal College of Defence Studies : "Sir how is it that when England does not call itself a Christian Republic, nor India calls itself a Hindu Republic, most Muslim countries have chosen to call themselves, Islamic Republics?"

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14. Ibid.
15. Sundeep Waslekar, 'New Rules for an Old Struggle', article published in the magazine of the *World Economic Forum*, Annual meeting, Davos 2004.
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