

Globalisation and Terrorism: The Case of Iraq

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Terrorism and incidents of terrorist violence have become the daily grist of the media today. Almost everyday television channels and newspapers carry reports of dramatic suicide bombings, brutal killings of innocent civilians, hijacking of airplanes and buses carrying innocent passengers, abductions of people and demands for ransom for the release of hostages and of encounters between armed forces and suspected insurgents. Such reports do not merely passively communicate but actively intervene in giving wide publicity to the terrorist groups that claim responsibility for such incidents and their political agendas. Media reports often swing public sympathy and support in favour or against the terrorist groups involved. In the process, modern media have extended the reach of terrorism across national borders. Terrorist outfits have now become significant actors in world politics.

We are only now becoming aware of the implications of contemporary globalisation for international relations. Emerging globalism is marked by the unprecedented dominance of the USA in world politics on the one hand and the rise and spread of insurgency all across the world on the other. An astute participant and observer of international politics Herbert Vedrine, the French foreign minister is of the view that the American dominance extends beyond economic, political and military spheres to cover lifestyle, language and even thought. He, therefore, refers to the USA as a 'hyper power' and holds that even the enemies of the USA are fascinated by the culture and power that the nation projects.¹

The obverse side of this 'hyper power' syndrome is the rise of terrorism world wide. The 11 September 2001 attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and on the

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Pentagon building in Washington have not allowed the US much time to relish her new status. The ghosts of Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda outfit have haunted the USA and dominated her strategic concerns and her foreign policy. America's 'war on terror' and the neo-conservative strategy of pre-emption have been responses to the threat posed by Al Qaeda. The rationale for pre-emption is that since the magnitude of the threat posed by terrorism is unknown, and since the risk of inaction may turn out to be huge, it is better to take pre-emptive measures to eliminate the threat altogether than to wait for convincing evidence to assess the threat and adopt appropriate measures.² This rationale shaped America's 'war on terror' and her decision to wage war to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The ostensible reason that the US government offered to justify the war was that it had convincing evidence of Saddam Hussein regime's secret attempts to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and of its nexus with terrorist groups.

World politics in the last decade has conferred the 'hyper power' status on the US no doubt, but her credibility and legitimacy to intervene in world affairs is getting eroded continually. When the US government along with her allies took the decision of bypassing the Security Council of the United Nations to resort to military action to 'liberate' Iraq, she lost the support of France and Germany, her traditional European allies. Both the French and German governments were not entirely against military action in Iraq, but insisted on multilateralism as expressed through the decisions of the United Nations Security Council. Both France and Germany expressed unhappiness at the 'unilateralism' of the US.³ When the US coalition forces marched into Iraq in March 2003, there were widespread protests and demonstrations in Europe, including the UK, the most prominent supporter of the US policy of pre-emption. As no clinching evidence about the Saddam Hussein regime's complicity in producing WMD came up, despite several searches made by the task force set up by the Security Council, public opinion in Britain and in Europe tended to be sceptical of the claims of President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair on the existence of WMD stockpiles in Iraq. Subsequently, the fact that the allied forces could not produce even a shred of evidence of

WMD in Iraq and contrary evidence produced by investigation commissions (the Butler Committee in the UK and the Congressional Committee in the US) separately set up in the two countries suggested that their respective intelligence agencies had indeed 'sexed up' their reports on Iraq's possession of WMD.⁴ These reports have considerably damaged the credibility of both the governments. The explanations offered by the two governments that Iraq was a fit case for military intervention despite not possessing WMD have not been convincing. In fact, the unfolding drama of Iraq may lead some observers to conclude the converse—that Saddam Hussein's regime would have been worth preserving despite all the atrocities perpetrated by it because it maintained peace and political stability.

It now appears that the USA has got itself embroiled in a political quagmire in Iraq which has now been converted into a fertile ground for terrorism. In a candid moment recently, President Bush stated that he had not anticipated the problems that his government is now encountering in Iraq and rued that it was perhaps not possible to eliminate terrorism entirely. What he did not mention, however, is that the strategy of pre-emption, instead of securing the US and the world from the dangers of terrorism may have made the world a more dangerous place by spawning new forms of terrorism and by legitimising terrorism and insurgency worldwide. The point that needs to be stressed here is that even as the forces of globalisation have projected and consolidated the US hegemony, it is becoming clear that the manner in which this hegemony is exercised has encouraged insurgency and terrorism. The terrorist groups have now acquired the flexibility to take advantage of the opportunities opened by globalisation to network with widely scattered groups, can use the global media skilfully to gain popular sympathy, and can mobilise men and materials to implement their evil designs. Consequently, they have become more significant than nation states in shaping the agenda of global geopolitics and in setting the basic terms of its discourse.

Right from the early days of the war in Iraq, it became clear that the Iraqis, despite their resentment of the oppressive and brutal Saddam regime, did not view the allied soldiers as their

saviours. Active resistance and skirmishes began even as the British troops tried to take over Basra city in the south of Iraq. The Iraqi Army and its famous Republican Guards shied away from confronting the allied troops in conventional battles but hid to reorganise themselves to engage in insurgency. According to experts, the three million members of Saddam's Baath party and nearly 700,000 strong Saddam Hussein's army provided recruits in large numbers to the insurgent groups. Almost soon after the allied forces captured Baghdad, radical Muslim clerics who had been suppressed by Saddam marched along with their followers to capture the biggest mosques in the city to preach a radical Islam that projects the USA as evil and anybody who supports it as an infidel. Soon after the take over of Iraq, Sunni insurgency erupted in Tikrit and spread to Fallujah and Baghdad—the three cities constituting the vertices of what has become the notorious 'Sunni Triangle'.⁵ The Sunnis who constitute only about 37 per cent of the population of Iraq, play a crucial role in Iraq because they were associated with the administration of the country. American occupation, the composition of the Interim Governing Council which includes only exiled Sunni leaders and the policies it adopted have systematically alienated the local Sunnis who feel that they will be reduced to the status of second class citizens in the new dispensation. According to one of the reports, there are 36 different Sunni insurgent outfits, some of them closely linked to the fundamentalist Wahabbi sect. There are also groups attached to puritanical Salafi and the mystical Sufi sects. These groups contain foreigners including Arabs from Saudi Arabia, Syrians and Jordanians. The most famous of them being Abu Masab Zarqawi who is regarded even by Bin Laden as an extremist. Zarqawi prefers to establish a supra-national caliphate in opposition to some of the other Sunni zealots who are nationalists. These insurgent groups have specialised in suicide bombings and in cleverly laying booby traps to kill unwary American soldiers and their local supporters.

Of late, abductions and brutal killing of foreigners have been on the increase as in the case of the recent killing of 12 Nepalese who were shot dead and later beheaded as the video tapes revealed.⁶ This was purportedly carried out by the extremist group

called Jaish Ansar al-Sunna whose spokesman justified the killing by stating the Nepalese were Buddhists who had come to Iraq to fight the Muslims. Some of the radical groups are also using their hostages to compel their national governments to do their bidding. In the recent abduction of Indian truck drivers, the Black Banners Brigade of the Islamic Secret Army which abducted them demanded that Kuwait and Gulf Link Transport Company that employed the drivers should cease operating in Iraq and provide a 'compensation' reportedly amounting to \$ 500,000.⁷ What is amazing in this episode is that the company agreed to the demands and the Indian government which claims to oppose terrorism in all forms acquiesced in the deal. Another group recently abducted two French journalists despite the fact that France opposed the war on Iraq. The group demanded that the French government annul the recent law it had passed banning girls from wearing head scarves while in school. It may be noted that to get the release of its abducted citizens, the Philippines government accepted the demand from the concerned militant group to withdraw their troops from Iraq. It is said that the terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda that carried out the Madrid train bombing wanted to warn the Spanish government that unless it withdrew its troops from Iraq, such attacks will continue. In Basra, a terrorist group deliberately burst an oil pipeline which immediately reversed the declining trend in world oil prices. These instances indeed testify to the globalisation of terrorism and the increasing power and legitimacy that terrorist groups are tacitly gaining all over the world.

Insurgency has also spread to the Shias who constitute about 60 per cent of the total population of about 25 million in Iraq. The young Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr who is a staunch opponent of US occupation prefers to convert Iraq into an Islamic theocratic state. He has rejected the interim secular constitution proposed by the Interim Governing Council. He is determined to drive the Americans out of Iraq and along with his followers has formed the Mahdi Army to take over the holy Imam Ali shrine in Najaf.⁸ The American troops laid siege to the shrine and began a bloody skirmish in which several American soldiers died along with hundreds of supporters of Muqtada al Sadr. The stand off came to an end when the revered Shia leader Al Sistani intervened to persuade the recruits of Mahdi Army to lay down their arms in

return for their safe passage out of the shrine. Al Sistani was acting at the behest of Iraq's new Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and the Interim Governing Council. Although Muqtada Sadr is the more popular Shia cleric who chose to rise against the occupation forces, there are about half a dozen other Shia insurgent groups active in Iraq.

Jehadi terrorist violence has now become a daily feature in Iraq taking the lives of many American soldiers. It has been estimated that the number of American military personnel killed in Iraq after the war exceeds the number killed in the war. More than 1000 American soldiers are reported to have been killed in Iraq in the last two years.⁹

It should be noted that there is some diversity in the insurgency witnessed in Iraq. Some of the insurgency groups appear to be offering principled resistance to the American occupation of Iraq. They represent genuine mass movements dedicated to the rectification of ideological distortion. There are others that seem to be mere extortionist rackets. But all of them are anti-America although they are sharply divided on ideological grounds. The proliferation of terrorist groups and their growing capacity to coerce the Interim Governing Council of Iraq as well as some of the nation states show that they are gaining in power and influence.

For obvious reasons, the occupation forces have generated considerable hostility among the Iraqis. One such reason is cultural. In the early days of occupation, the American soldiers in Fallujah opened fire on a marriage procession because they mistook the celebratory gun shots in the air as shots aimed at them. The predominantly Sunni residents of the town went berserk on hearing of the incident and went about targeting the Americans wherever and whenever possible. Media reports on the humiliating and brutal treatment meted out to the Iraqis imprisoned in the Abu Gharib prison did not also enhance the prestige of the allied Armed Forces. The reports of the committees that inquired into intelligence failure also highlight the lack of coordination between different branches of the US government that have contributed to the political mess created in Iraq.

A redeeming feature of the American occupation of Iraq is the decisive steps that have been taken to set up democratic institutions. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Paul Bremer ensured that terrorist acts were dealt with firmly and resolutely so that they did not disrupt the American commitment to establish genuine democracy in Iraq. The Americans ensured that the CPA handed over power to the 25 member Interim Governing Council consisting of leading Iraqi men and women on 28 June 2004, two days ahead of the planned date.¹⁰ The Governing Council met for the first time on 13 July 2003. Its goals are to help rebuild Iraq as well as to prepare for full, free and fair democratic elections in January 2005. The Interim Governing Council has prepared an interim constitution. A National Council of 1000 members met in August 2004 to select a 100 member parliament to oversee the elections. As at the time of its meeting the confrontation between Muqtada Sadr and the Governing Council threatened to escalate, the National Council also decided to send a delegation to mediate between the warring parties. It appears as if the unleashing of democratic processes has tempered political stakeholders in Iraq and encouraged in them the spirit of accommodation and compromise. The Interim Governing Council has also been able to ensure that Iraqi economy register rapid economic growth. These are major achievements indeed considering the violence and strife that Iraq has witnessed in the last two decades.

Such fledgling attempts to introduce democratic institutions and to work with them have indeed increased the stakes in the system for several groups including the ones that were on the fringes. Yet, trends towards religious fundamentalism that reject western models of democracy continue to dominate the politics of Iraq. There are of course some features of social structure that may work against such tendencies. One of them is the division of society along regional and ethnic lines. Hence, the hold of the radical Muslim clerics seem to be confined to small pockets and the rivalry among them may compel them to make compromises in order to wield power over the whole country. For the democratic experiment to succeed in Iraq the architecture of the new democratic constitution has to be designed on the basis of federal principles keeping in mind regional and ethnic divisions.

There are signs now that the US is changing its foreign policy orientation because of difficulties it is facing in establishing democracy in Iraq. The US government is now advocating what it terms the Greater Middle East initiative covering all the states in the Middle East and South Asia.¹¹ To encourage these countries to adopt democratic institutions, to become responsible for the protection of human rights and to adopt economic reforms, it is proposed that incentives in terms of increased foreign aid, closer political and economic co-operation and engagement, and security arrangements be provided by the US. A redeeming feature about this initiative is the possibility of the US applying pressure on the Saudi Arabia to introduce democratic reforms. As the oppressive monarchy in Saudi Arabia is the major factor encouraging and funding jihadi terrorism the world over, attempts to introduce democratic reforms under this initiative will go a long way in eliminating terrorism and in enhancing the prestige of its close ally the USA.

In the final analysis, it is ironic that the strategy of pre-emption adopted by the US has legitimised terrorism as a heroic fight for justice. The war on terrorism has not only extended the reach of terrorists but has even glamourised them. Hence what is needed is not the American variety of pre-emption but genuine attempts to pre-empt the causes of poverty, ignorance and oppression that provide a continuous stream of recruits to jihadi outfits.

Notes and References

1. Lara Marlowe, 'French Minister urges greater UN role to counter US hyperpower,' *The Irish Times*, 4 November 1999. In 1998, Vedrine coined the term 'hyper power' to describe the US because the word superpower seemed to him too closely linked to the Cold War and military issues. Since then it has come into political usage.
2. Diego Gambetta, 'Rethinking Terror' in <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR29.2/gambetta.html>.
3. It should be noted that while several countries disagreed with the US decision to invade Iraq they nevertheless extended

tacit support to the US by preferring to remain silent spectators of the war. This world wide silence is itself an eloquent testimony to US hegemony.

4. It later turned out that the intelligence agencies had used a doctoral thesis on Iraq to link up Iraq with WMD production.
5. http://www.cbc.ca/stories/sunni_triangle.
6. *The Hindu*, 1 September 2004.
7. *The Hindu*, 2 September 2004.
8. <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exerccs>.
9. www.iraqbodycount.com.
10. *The Hindu*, 29 June 2004.
11. Marina Ottoway and Thomas Carothers, Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief, 29 March 2004.

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