

GUEST ESSAY

The War on Terror – an assessment

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The July 7 bombings in London, and the failed attempts two weeks later, are instances of a wide range of incidents across the world since the 9/11 attacks and the vigorous US response that followed, initially in Afghanistan and more recently in Iraq. Although undertaken by local people, the London bombings do not differ greatly from other attacks, as many of the instances over the past four years have involved people from the countries concerned.

Those attacks include Karachi (3), Islamabad, Bali (2), Djakarta (2), Istanbul (2), Madrid, Tunis, Casablanca, Sinai, Amman Mombassa and many others. There are also reports of intercepted or failed attacks in Los Angeles, London, Rome, Paris and Singapore. Taken together, they show a pattern of activity by al-Qaida and associates that is substantially greater in intensity than in the four years prior to the 9/11 attacks. At the very least they suggest that the policies being pursued by the Bush administration in its global war on terror are not having the anticipated effects.

All the incidents form part of a diffuse movement centred on al-Qaida which has distinct aims. These are, in the short term:

- Eviction of foreign military forces from the Islamic world, especially the Middle East and South West Asia.
- Termination of the House of Saud as the corrupt and illegitimate Keeper of the Two Holy Places and its replacement by what would be seen as legitimate Islamist governance.
- Termination of elite pro-western regimes across the Middle East with a particular emphasis on states such as Jordan and Egypt.
- Establishment of a Palestinian state.
- Support for local movements such as the Southern Thailand separatists.

These are conceived in terms of a 10-20 year time-span. The movement already claims some success in view of the US military withdrawal from Saudi Arabia. The long-term aim of the movement is the re-establishment of an Islamist Caliphate, this being over a 50+ year time-span.

The US response to 9/11 and the subsequent al-Qaida and associated activity have been forceful and substantial. In operations in Afghanistan, al-Qaida was disrupted and the Taliban regime was terminated. Direct US military action has extended to Yemen, Syria and, more recently, Pakistan. There have been numerous detentions across the world and many elements of the al-Qaida leadership have been killed or detained, yet the movement remains viable and active as new elements of leadership come to the fore.

A second regime, in Iraq, has been terminated, on the questionable grounds of possessing weapons of mass destruction or being linked to terrorist organisations. Following that, though, a difficult insurgency is currently being experienced. While US authorities speak of a short war followed by an insurgency, the reality is that the conflict in Iraq should be considered as an ongoing war that is now entering its fourth year.

Since September 2001, there have been at least 35,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq, these being conservative estimates. Around 15,000 people are currently detained without trial, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan and some of them for four years or more. Over the period as a whole, some 70,000 people have been detained. Of these, barely one thousand have been brought to trial and about half of these have been acquitted.

The Iraq insurgency is proving extremely difficult to counter. The US forces have suffered close to 2,200 people killed and over 8,000 seriously injured. Around 25,000 US troops have been medically evacuated to the United States for combat or non-combat injuries or physical or mental illness. The insurgents have proved particularly adept at evolving new tactics and have also been singularly successful in engaging in economic

targeting, especially of the Iraqi oil and electrical power generating industries. The effects have been to massively hinder economic reconstruction and development.

In the face of an intractable insurgency, US forces are increasingly using their overwhelming advantages in firepower, especially in the form of helicopter gun-ships and strike aircraft, usually in urban environments and producing large numbers of civilian casualties and other forms of collateral damage. There appears to be a tendency for the US forces to decrease their ground-force operations in urban areas while developing well-protected bases from which heavily armoured patrols and helicopter gun-ships can operate. While the Bush administration may withdraw some troops in the run-up to the November 2006 mid-sessional elections to Congress, it is also clear that permanent bases are being established in Iraq, ensuring a US presence that could be measured in decades.

In addition to the protracted internal insurgency, Iraq is becoming a focus of the global war on terror in that young jihadists from a range of countries are now using it as a combat training zone. The presence of US troops, with the many connections with the Israeli Defence Forces, can be presented powerfully as a neo-Christian/Zionist enterprise to occupy the seat of the historic Abbasid Caliphate. This is an effective recruiting tool. Perhaps most extraordinary is the recent evidence of jihadists from Afghanistan travelling to Iraq for a few months, being trained in urban combat against US forces there and subsequently returning to Afghanistan to use their experience against the 19,000 US troops stationed there.

Between 2002 and 2004, a low level insurgency continued in Afghanistan, with peaks of conflict each summer. Since early 2005 this insurgency has developed into a more general process of violent opposition and has, unusually, extended into the winter of 2005-6. Insurgent targets have included Afghan politicians, police and security personnel, and aid workers. There has also been a series of assassinations of former Taliban personnel who have gone over to work with the Afghan government and the United States. Given the level of overstretch faced by US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Pentagon is keen to hand over much of the counterinsurgency role in Afghanistan to the

NATO-controlled International Security Assistance Force, changing its role from stabilisation to more aggressive counterinsurgency. There is unease among politicians and NATO military in several member states.

More generally, the growth of regional satellite TV news channels such as al-Jazeera is resulting in widespread knowledge of the impact of counter-insurgency operations especially in Iraq. The assault on Fallujah, the "city of mosques", in November 2004 has assumed an almost mythical status across the Middle East and more widely. The impact of the highly professional reporting of stations such as al-Jazeera is supplemented by the widespread and skilful use of the web, videos and DVDs by groups linked to the wider al-Qaida movement.

Foreign jihadists make up less than a tenth of the insurgents in Iraq but this may well increase, helping to ensure that Iraq becomes a training ground for new generations. This role will be akin to the situation in Afghanistan against Soviet forces in the 1980s or against the Northern Alliance in the 1990s, but with the important difference that such jihadist training opportunities in those decades were in terms of a conflict largely fought in rural or semi-urban areas. By contrast, the Iraq insurgency is essentially one of urban combat, the training opportunities being much more in tune with al-Qaida's seeking to achieve its aims elsewhere. Put bluntly, Iraq has been a gift to the movement.

The geopolitical significance of Persian Gulf oil reserves is immense. Iraq alone has some four times the oil reserves of the United States including Alaska, and the Persian Gulf region as a whole has over 60% of total world oil reserves including most of the most economically recoverable deposits. The United States is becoming progressively more dependent on oil imports as is China, and maintaining the security of the Gulf is seen as a major objective of US military planning. Complete military withdrawal from Iraq would be seen as a security disaster and is unlikely to be contemplated, whatever the political rhetoric. It is highly unlikely in the next few years. Thus, a US presence countered by a growing base for wider al-Qaida operations, whatever the political developments in Iraq, suggests a long drawn out war.

The London bombings form one part of that war and one should expect more such attacks, especially in countries forming part of the current coalition.

Whatever the value of all the many counter-terrorism methods and policies, the overall conduct of the "war on terror" is proving deeply counterproductive. Instead it is going to be necessary to put substantially greater effort into reducing support for the wider al-Qaida/Jihadist movement. This will involve an examination of those aims of the movement and assessing the most appropriate means of undercutting them. This, in turn, will require major changes in policy, not least in terms of the Israel/Palestine confrontation, relations with Arab elites, and current postures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is not evident that this forms part of the current political environment and there is currently little prospect for change. In the longer term, however, this will come, the more so as current policies are seen to be unsustainable.