

The Middle East and the ‘new terrorism’

Kayhan Barzegar

Assistant Professor of international relations in the Islamic Azad University (IAU), Science and Research Campus, Tehran, Iran & Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies, No. 20, Naderi St., Keshavarz Blvd., 14166 Tehran, Iran; kbarzegar@ihcs.ac.ir

Over the past 50 years, the Middle East has been a hub of tension and insecurity. Traditionally, threats to global peace and security ensued from wars and crises among regional states which thereby engaged the international system. Presently, threats to global security are considered in the context of global terrorism. September 11, 2001 has introduced a new approach to dealing with terrorism. In this approach, the West is determined to eradicate the root causes of new terrorism outside of its boundaries. Since global terrorism stems from the Middle East, exploring the correlation between regional issues and new terrorism is of great importance. As a whole, the roots of new terrorism have undoubtedly been associated with problems of the Middle East. If new terrorism was conceived in the region, one needs to consider the unique political, economic, cultural and religious characteristics which frame it on the one hand and the approach of the global system to dealing with these issues on the other.

This article focuses on the global community’s policies as the main contributing factor to the development of new terrorism. The following main questions are addressed:

1. Why has new terrorism appeared in the Middle East?
2. Have the current policies of the global system, as led by the US, ignored the threat posed by new terrorism? Has this approach itself been a threat to, or an opportunity for, global security?

To answer these questions, two hypotheses are developed in this article:

1. The roots of new terrorism are found in the political, cultural, and economic problems of the Middle East, which have been considerably affected by the conduct of the international community. Tackling such problems with military operations is rather pointless and

leads to the development of more hostility in the region. Effectively, the current conduct of global governance in the region has itself been a source of tension and insecurity.

2. As a result of the policies of the global system, the concepts of 'stabilisation' and 'democratisation' that are essential to any political and economic transformation – and thus to the eradication of terrorism – have diverged in the region to the extent that accommodating them in one context is largely inconceivable.

This article is organised into three sections. The first section compares the characteristics of old and new terrorism. The role of the global system's past policies in the region in relation to new terrorism is the subject of section two. The final section focuses on the current regional policies of the global system and their effects on global peace and security.

New terrorism

Terrorism has always existed throughout the world. What is new is that terrorism has acquired an international dimension with its own specific definition, which increases its importance within the global community. Introducing a new nature and definition, September 11 undoubtedly marked a turning point in terrorist activities. Old terrorism had internal or regional dimensions, functioning in specific spatial and time domains, and had less negative impact on the international community. In contrast, new terrorism acts beyond national and regional boundaries, has global impact and constitutes a direct threat to global peace and security.

International security, long threatened by wars and tensions among nations, is presently endangered by an unknown, complex, and unconventional force. This by no means suggests an easy resolution. In contrast with old terrorism, the new kind of terrorism has no individual, nationalistic, or state-sponsored characteristics. It occurs in many countries and is supported by a global network. The hub of new terrorism is the Middle East, its driving force is Sunni Islamic radicalism, and its representative is Al-Qaeda. Its main aims are as follows:

1. To destabilise international security;
2. To de-legitimise Western culture and values; and thereby,
3. To create a new balance of power between the West and the Islamic World.

As a result of these aims and characteristics, new terrorism is more ferocious and less tolerant. It stems from a radicalism which originates in the political, cultural and economic dissatisfaction with the policies of the global community within the nations of the Middle East. The type of terrorism resorted to by Al-Qaeda appeals to the hearts and minds of individuals to act for an idealistic end. 'As we are not safe, no one would have the right to be safe in the world', they argue. Accordingly, current suicide attackers fight for their faith and most importantly 'Allah's satisfaction', as they are certain that they will be blessed by God [1].

Finally, new terrorism is a tactic that is supported by a worldwide network. Considered in this way, no eradication of today's terrorism will succeed unless the root causes of its emergence on the one hand, and the motives of its adherents on the other, are identified and addressed. In the context of the Middle East, new terrorism no doubt stems from a collective sense of historical injustice, political subservience, and a pervasive sense of social humiliation inflicted by the global powers and their allies [2]. These political, cultural and psychological

complexities operate cumulatively to trigger the axis of global terrorism. Hence, without solving the existing problems in the region, no abolition of new terrorism is feasible.

The Middle East and new terrorism

With the advent of the September 11 events, the two subjects of new terrorism and Middle Eastern studies have emerged as two substantial components of international security studies. In other words, the subject of terrorism as the crucial threatening factor to international peace and security and as the major challenge facing the global community has acquired great importance.

The question that arises here is why new terrorism has emerged in the Middle East. To find a sensible answer, one should consider multiple contributing factors. Although the unique political, cultural and economic characteristics of Middle Eastern societies (i.e. their cultural-ethnic fragmentation, religious confrontations, traditional communities, the occurrence of the wars, etc.) provided a platform, the author maintains that, in dealing with the regional issues, the policies of the global community have played the major role for the development of new terrorism.

In the contemporary history of the Middle East, Britain and the United States have respectively shaped the policies of the global system. As for the British colonialist policies, it is imperative to understand that the political map and ethnic boundaries of the region were drawn in accordance with the demands of British foreign policy in the first half of the 20th century. The devastating British policies [3] based on securing British national interests have more than anything resulted in unrealistic territorial divisions and the consequent establishment of artificial states. As a result, no distinctly Arab or non-Arab state can be found today in the region without serious difficulty. Given these policies, the second half of the century witnessed numerous wars and crises and thus more ethnic and religious fragmentation in the region. The outcome was the enduring existence of authoritarian regimes which by enjoying the support of the global community have been able to suppress their national demands for political openness, fair distribution of power, and a competitive position in the globalised economy as the prerequisites for any democratisation process [4].

As for the role of the United States following the British withdrawal from the region in 1971, more complexity and tension has undoubtedly been brought into the region. In order to secure US national interests – as US leaders have recently confessed – the requests of the people from the Middle East for democratisation have long been sacrificed in order to achieve stability in the region [5]. Over the past three decades, US policies aimed at preserving stability have contributed to the halting of any democratisation efforts. These stability-seeking policies have been based on two strategic pillars: the control of energy sources and the termination of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Achieving the first goal, US foreign policy has manifested itself in two primary ways: support of autocratic regimes and military presence. After the first Persian Gulf War, arms transfers and diplomatic and economic support systems continue to play a substantial role in keeping autocratic regimes in power thereby strengthening regional stability. By virtue of their empowerment, these regimes have been able to carry out internal repression [6]. Opposition groups have not been allowed to compete in an open political process and there has been no democratic distribution of power. As a result of this policy, many Arabs today regard the US as guilty of delaying the creation of political openness [7]. Over the past years, demands to

establish real parliamentary systems have been foiled. The result is the emergence of extremism on the one hand, and the creation of a specific 'power-base' on the other hand, which in turn has encouraged new levels of extremism.

US policy in the region in the early 1980s also played a part in creating the initial conditions for radicalism to develop. For example, Washington backed Sunni radical groups against the Soviet army in Afghanistan as a means of limiting the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran. The result of that policy today is Al-Qaeda and new terrorism. Supportive US policy towards the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid 1990s provided Al-Qaeda with the opportunity to organise, recruit, and train operatives in preparation for terrorist activities around the world.

US support for regional regimes has moreover created a kind of 'power-base' which by its nature undermines work towards democratisation. As a result of these supportive policies we witness the existence of unusual authoritarian regimes along with distinctive closed power circuits in the region which are monopolised, unbalanced, unlimited, and offer advantages to those who are loyal to the core of the system. With the existence of these kinds of power bases, there is less chance for any democratisation process. Such a process could only occur at the determination of those in power, not by the will of the people.

As for US military presence, the first Persian Gulf War enabled the establishment of several permanent US military bases. This presence has continued and has become an important component in the forging of political alliances between the US and various Middle Eastern regimes. Although these regimes were grateful for this strong US presence during the 1990s, it is now felt that the American intervention was not in accordance with international law, nor did it facilitate self-determination or the development of human rights. Rather, it protected US access to, and control of, energy resources and was in essence purely self-interested in order to preserve stability in the region. US policy caused the new wave of religious extremism by creating dissatisfaction, distrust and a popular negative reaction against US military presence and its intervention in the internal affairs of the nations of the region. Ironically, this increase in tension and violence has itself become the main obstacle to further democratisation.

As regards termination of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, in order to preserve stability US policies have always favoured Israel as the counter-weight to the regional powers. Over the past decade the United States has not been a fair mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict: biased US policy has created enormous resentment as diplomatic, financial, and military support for the Israeli regime and its humiliating attitude to the Palestinians has continued. The failure of the US to be a fair mediator means that Arab feelings towards it are rapidly worsening.

This growing Arab frustration is thought of as the primary catalyst of the move towards extremism and of attempts to obtain rights through armed struggle or even sometimes through terrorist activity. As the Iraq case displays, some segments of more politicised and radicalised Sunni Muslims are feeling the need to wage Jihad in support of their suffering brethren and to restore the lost credit of Muslims. At present, Muslim public opinion is daily expressing its concern about the US led war on terror and its threat to Islam [8]. A negative view of US policy among Muslims had previously been largely confined to countries in the Middle East but has now increasingly spread to other parts of the Islamic world.

Another sign of the sacrifice of the democratisation effort is provided by US interference in overthrowing Mosadeq's national government in the 1953 coup in Iran, ultimately resulting in the extension of Shiite radicalism in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Although

Shiite radicalism introduced fewer threats to the global community, when combined with the flexible Persian culture it became the example of Sunni radicalism in the 1980s and 1990s. Presently, the main legitimacy of Al-Queda in the eyes of its proponents is the organisation's precious effort to delegitimise the regional regimes and thereby liberate Islamic nations from dependence on the West.

Viewed in this light, no place could have been more appropriate for the emergence of terrorist activities than the Middle East. In other words, new terrorism could in fact just have been a response to the ruin and misery prevalent in the Middle East. As an underlying reality, it is hard to find even one nation without territorial, political, and ethnic problems. Even within the nation-states we witness countless ethnic and religious fragmentations, which have now been fuelled by the new round of global interference such as the conduct of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The global community and the war on terrorism: threat or opportunity?

Irrespective of what component(s) contributed the evolution of new terrorism, the main challenge now is whether the current confrontation of terrorist activities has resulted in the eradication of, or at least a reduction in, the terrorist threat to international security. Are the current policies the continuation of the previous ones, or has some fundamental change occurred?

With the events of September 11, a worldwide consensus has emerged among as to how the terrorist threat should be tackled, namely, as the priority of international peace and security. Accordingly, confronting new terrorism has become a cornerstone the foreign policies national governments. On the other hand it has become a source of pressure when applied to so-called rebel states, who regard the existing order as a threat to their systems and thus are unsympathetically questioning the current international system. The war on terrorism has generally gained legitimacy and justification among the international community, nation-states today considering it to be their obligation to support the movement for security. Consequently, as the representative of the global system (or even as claimed, its head) and as the major victim and target of new terrorism, the United States has come to dominate the scene with the new rhetoric of abolishing terrorist activities by prioritising democratisation processes.

From the perspective of the US administration, future September 11 type scenarios can only be prevented through liberalisation and democratisation of the Middle Eastern countries [9]. This was a key rationale used by the Bush administration to mobilise public support for conducting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The justification of starting war on terrorism was based on eradicating Al-Queda type terrorist activities in Afghanistan and the subsequent war in Iraq was justified by the excuse of denying terrorist access to Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). From this perspective, removing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein as the two components of the expanding new terrorism constitute the great effort made by the US to establish stability and security in the Middle East and, thus, in the world.

Irrespective of the purposes behind the present talk of the US administration on the necessity to democratise the Middle East [10], one should ask whether this type of democratisation would effectively work in the region. The fundamental question is now what the global community has accomplished by conducting almost three long occupation wars. Has the approach of the global system to dealing with new terrorism led to any proper outcome, and is the world is a safer place now? Has the region shifted to a secured place, as a prerequisite of

the democratisation process? And has the operational and organisational power of terrorists declined?

New terrorism, as argued, operates through persuading the thoughts and hearts of its believers and utilises 'life as a weapon'. It talks about the mistreatment by the global community of the Muslim world. Viewed in this context, the foreign presence in the region and conducting the current type of wars against terrorist activities will undoubtedly have counter-productive consequences. How would it be possible to find a military solution to a political-cultural problem? As the current problems in the Middle East have cumulative effect, rooting out new terrorism requires first identifying, and then solving, regional difficulties.

In order for the global community to remain safe, the Middle East must become stable and prosperous. This is a massive undertaking with at least two very complex components for global governance:

1. Committing to remove the authoritarian regimes in the region, which will destabilise the closed power circuits in the regional states, inevitably leading to further extremism and ultimately to terrorist activities. The result is again instability and the undermining of democratisation.
2. Solving the Palestinian problem, which appears to be the most pivotal fuel of new terrorism.

The consequences of conducting wars on new terrorism are as threefold: insecurity is spread across the world, religious-ethnic fragmentation is escalated, and the dissatisfaction in the region's countries is accelerated.

Spreading insecurity across the world

Assuming that the existence of insecurity and disorder will provide the best conditions for terrorists operations, US strategies have intensified insecurity in the region. War followed by overwhelming military presence in Iraq not only resulted in a secured Iraq, in increased instability and violence in the region. The underlying fact is that the first priority of Middle Eastern citizens today is security, not democratisation. In other words, the people of the region are now prioritising daily matters such as safety, a certain future, and better economic conditions, rather than the growing rhetoric about promoting freedom and democratisation. As a result of the paradoxical conduct of the global system, there is effectively no place more hostile to democracy and the globalisation process than the greater Middle East.

Today, the Arab nations of the region are wary of the current US policies. As history shows, Arab Muslims have always resisted domination by foreigners, particularly non-Muslims. No doubt, the more extensive presence of the West will bring more violence and dissatisfaction in the Arab public opinion. As a result, no place in the world is safe for Western citizens.

Escalating religious-ethnic fragmentation

The war on terrorism has undoubtedly accelerated religious, ethnic, and identity related fragmentation at the worldwide and/or at the regional and national levels. At the global level, while the terrorist threat expands from the Middle East and the Arab world, the division between Islam and Christianity is widening and becoming more complicated. Since the West is the place of diverse religious Muslim minorities, these reciprocal unsympathetic conditions will breed

more anxiety and tension between the two worlds. In this context, Muslims today feel unsafe and humiliated in the West. Engulfing the two worlds, new terrorism is increasingly seeking more divergence between Muslims and Christians.

At the regional and national levels, the almost three-year war on terrorism neither resulted in a safer region, nor led to more convergence. On the contrary, waging wars in multi-ethnic countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq has intensified ethnic and religious factionalism and, hence, provided breeding grounds for terrorist activities. In Afghanistan, for instance, the US has begun working separately with the central government and the influential regional commanders called Warlords or Mojaheddins in order to hunt Al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants. While paradoxical US policies have stepped up insecurity and disorder, Afghans have become frustrated and disappointed of the efforts of the international community to fill the power vacuum in the country. Although the uncivilized Taliban regime no longer has a physical existence, their thoughts still dominate the country. In illegitimate and malignant unity with terrorist organisations, international drug smugglers are taking advantage of ethnic and religious fragmentation and disorder inside the country, thereby fuelling new terrorism. Absolute US support of Karzi as the representative of the ethnic Pashtuns has broken up the natural power equations, thus disappointing the other political and ethnic factions and leading to their loss of confidence in the power division. This would work as a driving force for more skirmishes. As a result, a new wave of severance is on the way, notably between the Pashtuns and the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek, and among Shias and Sunnis, as evident in the upcoming presidential election.

Unlike Afghanistan, the political scene in Iraq presents a more complex challenge to global peace and security. As a result of the manipulation of the power division, rivalry within the diverse ethnic Sunni, Shia and Kurdish factions has intensified to the extent that the extremist Sunnis (the group led by Zarqawi) today regard the Shias as their number one enemy. The enmity not only accelerated among the ethnic groups, also within the groups themselves there are different adversary segments with competing approaches toward the occupation forces, the role of neighbouring countries, the future of the government, etc. The current division between the various Shiite factions is a substantial testament. Significantly, the uprising of the Shiite group of Moqtada Al-Sadar against the occupation forces is the result of current US efforts to marginalise the Shias from the real power division. No Shiite group has forgotten the unsupportive American policy in the 1991 uprising, which left thousands of Shias massacred by the Saddam regime. Understandably, no trust today exists among the Shias as regards US policies.

Accelerating the regional countries' dissatisfaction

Since the US established its new and direct presence in the region, the regional states have started to obstruct the policies of the global community. As an immediate result of the war in Afghanistan and subsequently in Iraq, the current US administration never denied its purpose to change the regimes in Iran or Syria. Unrealistic US conduct in dealing with the two solid opponents have caused these countries to be considered as threats rather than as opportunities in war against terrorism.

As an underlying reality, the most sacred principle for Middle Eastern establishments is safeguarding the system. While the US is determined to advance its grand strategy of regime change, it is understandable that the establishment in Tehran and Damascus will do their best

to keep the US and its allies busy and more engaged in Iraq. No more important justifications can be raised here for the opposition of these countries to global governance. As for the other Arab allies, it gets more complicated – unlike in the past, future US strategy leaves no place for authoritarian corrupt regimes. The divergence between stability and democratisation comprehensively demonstrates itself here. Ironically, in the current Middle East any effort toward democratisation equals instability, and instability equals increased terrorist activities. The paradox lies here: the democratisation of the region requires stability and security to be the first priorities. As the Iraqi political scene shows, any further attempts to advance the regime change policy will in the short term lead to more insecurity, the engagement of the global community and ultimately the spreading of new terrorism.

As regards Iran, the Islamic Republic is currently neither looking to export its revolution, nor using the ideological approach to set its regional policies as was intended shortly after the Revolution [11]. Similar to any other political system, the core of the system gives the first priority to protecting itself through empowering the means of influence and those faithful to the system. The system upheld, the Iraqi political scene indeed presents a new challenge for the establishment in Tehran. From the perspective of Iran as the next target of the US administration, the key role of Teheran in the war on terrorism becomes one of a threat instead of an opportunity. Many elements make Iran an influential country in the war against terrorism: the unique geopolitics of Iran (with 15 neighbouring countries, located between Afghanistan and Iraq, two centres of the spreading new terrorism) and its pro-western social and cultural orientation are two important facts in encountering terrorist activities. As Shiite radicalism declines and Sunni radicalism rises in the region, Iran could play a precious role in balancing extremism as the foremost fuel of new terrorism. Accordingly, as long as the US administration is determined to pursue the policy of regime change in Tehran, the role of the Islamic Republic in the war on terrorism could be understandably unco-operative.

Conclusion

It is unrealistic to solve a profound cultural-political problem by military means. The war on terrorism can not be won with traditional warfare, but must be won politically with long-term plans. The root causes of new terrorism originate in the problems of the region, notably created by the policies of global governance. The two principles of stability and democratisation essential for eradicating new terrorism have diverged. Ironically, in the current state of the Middle East any effort toward democratisation needs stability and security, and any stability in turn needs democratisation.

Global governance needs to help to create a calm regional environment in which democratic change can occur. In contrast, the almost three years long global presence in the region has intensified insecurity and fragmentation and hence fuelled terrorist activities. The current overwhelming military presence leaves no chance for such developments. It must be recognised that any change in the region must come from within the societies. No example of imposed democracy has been successful in the world, since it needs to be offered in compromise with the national characteristics. A stable, democratic and prosperous Middle East depends on fair and just global governance, working with all the regional societies, not by one power alone. Whereas conducting the current type of war on terrorism may in the short term

lead to some achievement in halting or reducing terrorist activities, it will cause more complexity in long term.

Notes

1. Riaz Hassan, Life as a weapon, ISIM Newsletter 14 (June 2004) 9. For further information in this regard see also Sabine Damir-Geilsdore, Martyrdom & resistance in the Middle East, ISIM Newsletter, *ibid*.
 2. Riaz Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
 3. Up until 1971, Britain was for centuries the most influential state and the representative of the global community in shaping Middle East issues.
 4. Ronald D. Asmus and Michael McFau, Let's get serious about democracy in the Greater Middle East, Progressive Policy Institute, 9 March 2004 (http://www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/showArticle3.cfm?Article_ID=9149).
 5. See George W. Bush's Speech at the National Endowment for Democracy, 6 November 2003. (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>).
 6. For further information, see Stephan Zunes, US policy toward political Islam, Foreign Policy in Focus, 12 September 2001. (<http://www.alternet.org/story/11479>).
 7. Mahmood Sarioalghalam, Justice for all, The Washington Quarterly, Summer 2001, p. 115.
 8. In opinion polls conducted and released by the Pew Research Centre, the Muslim public expressed their concern about the US-led war on terror and its threat to Islam. A negative view of US policy among Muslims had previously been largely confined to countries in the Middle East, but has now increasingly spread to other parts of the Islamic world. Crucially, solid majorities in the Palestinian Authority, Indonesia and nearly 50% of those questioned in Morocco and Pakistan said they had at least some confidence in Osama Bin Laden to do the right thing with regard to world affairs. 71% of Palestinians agreed with his actions. See the Pew Research Center, Views of a Changing World 2003, 3 June, 2003.
 9. Riaz Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
 10. Democratisation in the Middle East as the sole solution for security and peace in the region is expressed in the US Greater Middle East Plan. For further information see Rabin Wright and Glenn Kessler, Bush aims for Greater Mideast plan", The Washington Post, 9 February 2004.
 11. See Kayhan Barzegar, Détente in Khatami's foreign policy and its impact on the improvement of Iran-Saudi relations, Discourse: an Iranian English Language Quarterly 2 (2) (Fall 2000) 157.
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