

“Warlordism” and the War on Terrorism

By Ken Menkhaus

The U.S. government’s announced intention to broaden the war on terrorism beyond Afghanistan has triggered growing concern that other important U.S. foreign policy goals and principles will be subordinated in the process.

The line of reasoning goes something like this. To build an effective set of alliances against terrorist networks, the U.S. will need to direct considerable levels of economic and military aid to governments that share our agenda. Those governments will exploit the urgency of our mission by demanding sizable concessions in exchange for their cooperation. U.S. pressure for democratization, respect for human rights, anti-corruption measures, economic liberalization, and other cherished agendas will be quietly shelved so as not to irritate needed allies who find those policies nettlesome. In some instances, our friends will engage in reprehensible behavior, and we will be forced to look the other way because national security imperatives demand it.

Concerns about the inevitable “quid pro quo” that will define our alliances in the broader war on terrorism are not unwarranted. We had ample experience with these unpleasant tradeoffs as part of our containment policies in the cold war. More recently, we watched as numerous third world countries exacted significant economic and political concessions from the U.S. in exchange for their support of Operation Desert Storm against Iraq. It is hardly unreasonable to worry that a protracted war on terrorism will again lead to concessions to unpalatable third world leaders whose only redeeming feature is a shared commitment to combating Islamic terrorism.

That’s the bad news. It will come as no comfort, then, to hear that we’ll be lucky indeed if our worst problem is the tradeoffs inherent in “quid pro quo” relationships. A far more insidious

problem, one which lurks in the chaotic corners of many failed states where our war on terrorism is likely to lead us, is the “quid pro no” scenario. That is, we will be drawn into providing military and economic aid to “allies” who are happy to help us fight a war on terrorism—but who have no intention of seeing that war won. The war on terrorism, for some, is to be a war without end.

One of the unpleasant realities of contemporary conflict is that in many parts of the third world, wars are no longer being fought to win, but rather are fought to create and maintain environments of lawlessness and violence from which certain groups and individuals profiteer. Over the course of the 1990s, this phenomenon has come to be called “warlordism.” In Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Colombia, Angola, Somalia, Sudan, and elsewhere, war is waged mainly to enable the protagonists on all sides to loot and profit from extralegal control of trade in everything from diamonds to timber to diverted food relief. The key to these protracted armed conflicts is that, despite public appearances, neither rebel nor “government” forces have an interest in ending the war, and even less of an interest in a return to rule of law. In some instances governments and rebels even collude to perpetuate the wars from which they profit.

As it happens, a number of these failed states are located in regions where Islamic terrorist cells like al-Qaeda might relocate or expand operations. The U.S. is likely, then, to find itself stepping into neighborhoods where war—including a war on terrorism—is viewed by many as an opportunity, not a problem.

Leaders of some of these failed states have already been quick to appreciate the new and tantalizing opportunities for windfall profits that a war on terrorism could bring. The self-declared “transitional national government” of

Somalia, for instance, quickly established an “anti-terrorist task force” following September 11 and has repeatedly called for external aid to prevent that failed state from being misused as a safe haven for terrorists. Never mind that the transitional authorities have been unable even to open the seaport and airport of Mogadishu, much less monitor and combat terrorism countrywide. For these leaders of failed states, the war on terrorism promises the return of cold war levels of foreign aid and all the opportunities for personal enrichment that entails.

And make no mistake: Leaders in these failed states are no fools. They understand that the war on terrorism is a meal ticket. They will be quick to calculate that a successful campaign against terrorism in their country will lead only to a return to marginalization, and an end to strategically driven foreign aid. They may have been unable to prevent the end of the cold war, for which some in the third world have an ironic nostalgia, but they can do much to insure that a war against terrorism is never quite won. Antiterrorist campaigns in these countries may come to constitute a shell game, not an end game.

We are fighting the war on terrorism to win, but must not presume that that logic prevails elsewhere. In the context of “post-modern warfare” that exists in many of the failed states in the third world, many will share our enthusiasm to wage the war, but few will be eager to end it.

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