

Bush Policies Make Terrorism a Growth Industry

By R. Bruce St John | May 24, 2004

Bush administration policies in the war on terrorism mutated the global threat, mobilizing anti-U.S. sentiment. The crisis in Iraq, coupled with radical shifts in U.S. policy in the Middle East and elsewhere, gave extremists a new focus, allowing radical groups to widen their appeal among Muslims and others. A terrorism alarm sounds everyday somewhere in the world, canceling flights, closing embassies, killing people.

Terrorism on the Rise

First, the Bush administration has steadfastly refused to define terrorism. In the Bush lexicon, terrorism is a catchall term for interpreting diverse conflicts, from separatist movements to paramilitary activity to arms and narcotics trafficking. The failure to define terrorism enabled the White House to label almost anybody opposed to its policies as a terrorist organization. Groups as diverse in structure and objectives as Peru's Shining Path, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Basque Fatherland and Liberty, the Communist Party of the Philippines, and Hamas are on the State Department's list of designated foreign terrorist organizations.

Early on, this approach served the White House well in its search for recruits in the war on terrorism. Opposition groups in countries whose support the U.S. deemed essential to winning the war were often labeled "terrorist" in an effort to curry support from host governments.

But over time, the failure to define terrorism has become a real liability. The U.S. now has some 5 million names on its master terror watch list, people who are identified as terrorist or believed to represent a potential threat. By listing any terrorist from any terrorist organization, we create a problem, not a solution. We lose focus, and we jeopardize democratic values, trying to monitor that vast number of people. The size of this inclusive terror list also belies official statements that the real concern, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, are relatively small in number, a few hundred or thousand at most.

Related to the first factor is the Bush administration's eager application of the al-Qaeda label to virtually any Islamic group threatening terrorist acts. Regional terrorist groups are invariably portrayed as having been co-opted by al-Qaeda and subject to its command and control. As a result, geographical and country specialists have been forced on the defensive. With the media focused on the global war on terrorism, the White House is not interested in the historical, political, economic, and cultural factors that shaped regional dissident groups. Take Southeast Asia as an example. All of the U.S.-designated terrorist groups in the region were founded long before al-Qaeda made its appearance. Some originated in the 1940s. Al-Qaeda wanna-bes are out there, often motivated by Bush administration policies, but al-Qaeda isn't everywhere.

Third, the Bush administration has come to see Arab-Muslim terrorism as a phenomenon quite separate from its causes. The Israeli-Palestinian dispute remains the central issue in the Middle East, and until Washington returns to the role of honest broker, there is no hope for a peaceful resolution. The Bush administration has largely accepted the Israeli version of the intifada, viewing the violence of the Palestinians as "terror" and the inevitable Israeli response as "legitimate self-defense." As a result, both sides are trapped in a downward spiral of violence and retaliation. White House support for Israel's policy of extrajudicial killings, which undermines U.S. initiatives to promote human rights, democracy, and civil society in the region, only compounds the problem.



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Military Solutions to Political Problems

U.S. policy in Iraq exemplifies a growing tendency on the part of the Bush administration to apply military solutions to political problems, often ignoring larger issues. Latin American governments, following the rebirth of democracy in the 1980s, largely ruled out giving police duties to their armed forces. U.S. officials are now pressuring them to expand the military's role, arguing that it is the only force with the skills and resources necessary to meet new threats. Southeast Asian states also expressed deep concern recently when the head of the U.S. Pacific Command, without prior consultation, announced U.S. plans to curb transnational crime in and around the Strait of Malacca.

In Africa, the Bush administration has opened a new front in the war on terrorism, equipping and training armies in states seen as potential sanctuaries for terrorists or long-term sources of oil. Some 100 special operations groups are training armies in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, largely Muslim states, in a program known as the Pan-Sahel Initiative. Its goal is to help states guard porous borders against terrorists, arms, and other trafficking. The Pentagon is also expanding its presence through training exercises or military base agreements in other states from Algeria to Liberia to Senegal to Uganda.

The American adoption in Iraq of Israeli tactics employed in Palestine adds to the problem. The early use of plastic handcuffs and hoods was followed by the demolition of Iraqi homes and businesses, together with the prolonged detention of prisoners without rights or charges. Most recently, we have the growing prisoner abuse scandal. The power of images is enormous in the Arab-Muslim world. And the pictures television viewers see of American troops in action in Iraq often mirror images of Israeli troops in action in Gaza and the West Bank. The Israeli use of dehumanizing force against the Palestinians has proved counterproductive, simply increasing Palestinian opposition to Israeli occupation. The same is true for the U.S. use of similar tactics in Iraq.

Another downside to the growing U.S. dependence on force is that it encourages semi-democratic and authoritarian states to brutalize their own

populations. From Russia's treatment of Chechen separatists to China's handling of the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang province, governments around the world are adopting harsh measures to deal with dissident groups, separatists, and Islamists, applying military solutions to long-standing political issues in the name of fighting terrorism.

Global Terrorism

Southeast Asian states, long considered the Islamic periphery due to their pluralism, secularism, and moderate Islamic stance, now confront a small but increasingly potent terrorist threat. The rise of extremist terrorism also obscures a fundamental shift in Islam toward an increasingly conservative mainstream. American policies encourage this conservative shift but are not the source of it.

In Indonesia, White House attempts in April to ensure that the leader of Jemaah Islamiya, a militant Islamic organization linked to the 2002 Bali nightclub bombing, remained in jail set off a diplomatic and political tempest. Nationalists and Islamists denounced the move as undue involvement in Indonesia's internal affairs.

In the Philippines, U.S. officials recently warned President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo that her government was not doing enough to combat terrorism. U.S. concerns centered on the activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. While the need for effective action was real, Washington erred in thinking international terrorists created the situation in the southern Philippines and controlled the combatants. Despite the Islamist foundations of both groups, and the potential for an allegiance with Jemaah Islamiya, the conflict in the southern Philippines is rooted in local issues that predate the war on terror and are unlikely to be resolved through money or arms alone.

In Thailand, the Buddhist-dominated government used overwhelming force in late April to thwart coordinated attacks on police stations and security checkpoints in the predominantly Muslim south. Some 107 militants, most in their teens or early 20s, were killed, including an entire village soccer team. Local residents voiced bewilderment and anger at the

killings, especially the slaughter of 30 assailants in the historic Krue Se mosque. Authorities initially offered contradictory explanations for the violence, ranging from drugs and arms trafficking to mafia turf battles to Islamic separatists. Both officials and local villagers later agreed that the foiled attacks were spurred by widely broadcast images of al-Qaeda and the U.S. occupation of Iraq. As the father of one of the victims said: "What happens in Iraq and Palestine and Afghanistan really makes me angry. It makes me want to fight back." Events in Thailand sparked fears and arrests in Cambodia because members of its small Muslim minority often study in southern Thailand.

The Madrid train bombings in March confirmed European fears that they are vulnerable to terrorist attack. Terrorists wanted for the Madrid bombings later blew themselves up, killing one police officer and injuring others. Elsewhere, British authorities arrested 10 in anti-terror raids, and Swedish police arrested 4 men, including one U.S. citizen, linked to terrorism. In response, Muslim leaders in Sweden expressed mounting concern at being stereotyped as terrorists.

In Africa, Morocco has become both a target and an operating base for terrorist attacks. Most of the suspects in the Madrid bombings were Moroccan with the suspected mastermind a Tunisian. European officials have complained that the Moroccans tend to blame al-Qaeda for all terrorist plots, rather than recognizing a wider ideological inspiration, because it frees them from responsibility. The Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, successor to an organization formed to overthrow the monarchy, was listed as a terrorist organization last year. Another home-grown concern is the Algerian-based Salafist Group for Call and Combat which kidnapped 32 tourists last year. Chad's army allegedly killed 43 Salafists in mid-March in 2 days of heavy fighting near the border with Niger.

In the Middle East, Jordanian police killed 4 suspects believed to have ties to an al-Qaeda cell only 3 weeks after security forces uncovered a major plot to attack U.S. and Jordanian targets in Amman. Saudi Arabia came under al-Qaeda-linked attacks on the following day when a suicide bomber killed 2 and wounded 60 in Riyadh. Extremism arrived in Syria

later in April when terrorists exploded a car bomb and engaged in a fierce gun battle in Damascus. Israel remained a frequent target of Palestinian attacks.

In Latin America, U.S. officials continue to paint the Triborder Area, where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet, as a hotbed of dangerous criminal and terrorist activity. A wide range of radical groups, from Colombian guerrillas to white supremacists to Hezbollah, allegedly meet there to swap tradecraft. On the other hand, the conflict in Colombia offers proof that some of the bloodiest terrorism in the world has no link to Islamic fundamentalism.

Dangerous World

The world today is clearly a more dangerous place than it was on September 10, 2001, or last year before the invasion of Iraq. This is true for Americans. But it is equally true for Spaniards, Indonesians, and most especially, Iraqis.

Unfortunately, the annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report, recently issued by the State Department, belies the dangerous world in which we live. It concludes that the number of international terrorist attacks in 2003 was the lowest since 1969. Describing Iraq as "a central front in the global war against terrorism," the report excludes most attacks during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom on the grounds that they "do not meet the longstanding US definition of international terrorism because they were directed at combatants." The report also excludes hundreds of Iraqi civilians killed by one side or the other. While it includes Israelis killed by Palestinian suicide bombers, it also excludes Palestinians killed in retaliatory strikes of "legitimate self-defense."

The Bush administration has yet to recognize that the outcome of the war on terrorism will depend on the quality of the peace. By ruling out the peaceful settlement of disputes in Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere, the White House has not eliminated terrorism. It has provoked it. And it has also legitimized terrorism in many parts of the world. A cursory survey of global terrorist activity reveals an incredibly wide array of distinct and interconnected motives.

With a growing number of groups declaring the U.S. their number one enemy, the war on terror could last for generations, if we don't take a different tactic. Until we do, the world in the coming weeks, months, and years will likely remain a very dangerous place.

Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002).

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