

Bombings and Repression in Egypt Underscore Failures in U.S. Anti-Terrorism Strategy

By Stephen Zunes | August 11, 2005

The devastating bombings which struck the Egyptian city of Sharm al-Sheik on July 24 underscore both the extent of the threat from Islamist terrorists and the failure of the United States and its allies to effectively deal with it.

That the bombers were somehow able to get around the military checkpoints through which traffic on all the major roads leading into the city must pass is a sobering indication of the terrorists' sophistication and their network of support. The blasts killed 88 people, nearly twice as many as did the more-publicized terrorist bombings in London two weeks earlier. And it could have been far worse: two of the three bombs went off well short of their intended targets.

Terrorist attacks this past October in Taba and Ras a-Satan, other coastal resort cities on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, killed an additional 32 people.

Support for Despotic Regimes

Why has Egypt become the target of such terrorist violence?

While governments which supported the American invasion of Iraq may have become particularly attractive targets for Islamist terrorists, this is not the case with Egypt, which joined virtually all other Arab governments in opposition to the war.

And though the U.S.-led invasion has certainly increased the ranks of Islamist terrorists in the Middle East and beyond, Arab dictators such as Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak have been targeted by al-Qaida and like-minded Islamist extremists long before the ill-fated U.S. conquest of Iraq.

Indeed, support for corrupt and despotic regimes has long been recognized as the single biggest grievance of Islamists against the United States, even more so than U.S. support for Israel and the war against Iraq.

Egypt has been under Mubarak's autocratic rule for almost a quarter century. Amnesty International and other reputable human rights groups have documented gross and systematic human rights abuses against perceived opponents of the regime, including massive detention without due process, torture on an administrative basis, and extra-judicial killings. Targets of government repression have included not just radical Islamists, but leftists, liberal democrats, feminists, gay men, independent-minded scholars, Coptic Christians, and human rights activists.

Despite promises of incipient democratic reforms, which have been hailed by the Bush White House, Mubarak has thus far refused to allow supporters of any kind of genuine political opposition to organize.

On July 30, plain-clothes Egyptian security forces, wielding truncheons, violently attacked peaceful protestors demonstrating against human rights abuses by the U.S.-backed regime. More than 1,000 uniformed security officers prevented the demonstration from taking place at Tahrir Square, in heart of Cairo, where it had been scheduled. When some demonstrators attempted to reassemble several



Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)

www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

blocks away, the police assault began. Scores were arrested, including George Ishaq and Amin Eskandar, leaders of Kifaya, the country's leading pro-democracy group. Among those most seriously wounded were journalist Shaaban Abd al-Rahim al-Daba and trade union activist Kamal Abbas, director of the Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services in the city of Helwan.

This assault by Egyptian security forces followed a similar attack last spring against a group of women protesting peacefully for greater democracy the day of a government-managed plebiscite supposedly opening up the political process. Though the Bush administration has praised these supposed reforms as evidence of a democratic change in the Middle East, the Mubarak regime has actually strengthened its power to limit the ability of opposition political parties to challenge the government, further restricted these parties' rights to publish newspapers, and made it virtually impossible for independent candidates to run for president.

It is tragic but not surprising that in a political system where the people are effectively barred from expressing their political grievances legally and nonviolently, some Islamist opponents have responded through terrorism.

U.S. support for the Egyptian regime, therefore, places Americans at risk. Largely as a result of the longstanding bipartisan U.S. effort to prop up the Mubarak dictatorship has led to

a bare 2% of Egyptians looking favorably upon the United States, according to a recent public opinion poll. It is important to remember that Muhammed Atta, the lead 9/11 hijacker, was an Egyptian.

Misplaced Priorities

Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid in the world, receiving over \$2 billion annually, much of that in weaponry and security assistance. Concerns expressed by pro-democracy groups in Egypt and human rights organizations in the United States that such arms and technology transfers are only making further repression possible has been rejected by Washington.

The Sharm el-Sheik bombers' decision to target hotels catering to foreign tourists was probably not designed primarily to kill "foreign infidels" per se, but was

more likely a strategic calculation designed to cripple the country's vital tourist industry, which provides the government with needed foreign exchange but—outside of the relatively small numbers of Egyptians who work in service jobs catering to tourists—tends not to trickle down to ordinary people.

Sharm el-Sheik, which is well over 300 miles from the pyramids and most other ancient sites which have attracted Western tourists for centuries, is the country's leading resort and international conference center. It serves as the Egyptian equivalent of Mexico's Cancun, isolated from the country's population centers and

It is tragic but not surprising that in a political system where the people are effectively barred from expressing their political grievances legally and nonviolently, some Islamist opponents have responded through terrorism.

displaying a level of opulence few in Egypt could ever experience themselves. While the pride of many Egyptians, it serves for many others as a symbol of the Mubarak regime's misplaced economic priorities which emphasize prestigious development projects while the country's poor majority go without basic material needs and employment opportunities.

Egyptian Islamists have long stressed the government's role in perpetuating the extreme social inequality and economic injustice in this country of 75 million. Unlike the progressive vision put forward by proponents of liberation theology in Latin America, however, the more radical Islamists—such as those believed to have been responsible for the July 24 bombings—have instead taken advantage of people's legitimate grievances to advance their decidedly reactionary ideology and violent tactics.

Even putting aside the Iraq debacle, the bombings in Sharm al-Sheik—like the London bombings which preceded them—also raise questions regarding the efficacy of counter-terrorism policies by the United States and its allies.

Is high-altitude bombing and related military operations chasing down elusive al-Qaida leaders really the best way to deal with the threat from a decentralized network of underground terrorist cells? Might placing greater emphasis on intelligence-gathering, interdiction, and

related measures be a more effective way to combat terrorism?

Rather than pushing for greater democracy primarily in Syria, Iran, and other countries controlled by dictatorships the United States does not like, might it serve our purposes better if we also promoted democracy in countries ruled by dictatorships like Egypt, over which the U.S. government can exert far more influence? Indeed, the overwhelming majority of al-Qaida's leadership and members come from U.S.-backed dictatorships, not the autocratic anti-American regimes which have become the focus of the Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties.

Instead of providing unconditional military aid and economic support to such regimes, might we instead make assistance to foreign governments conditional on their willingness to uphold internationally-recognized standards of human rights?

And, for a fraction of the costs of what the United States has spent on its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, might greatly-expanded U.S. support for sustainable grassroots economic development in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries constitute a better means to address the root causes of Islamist terrorism?

Unfortunately, not only has the Bush administration refused to reevaluate its counter-terrorism policy, no prominent Congressional Democrat has bothered to raise such questions either. Unless and until prominent voices are

Indeed, the overwhelming majority of al-Qaida's leadership and members come from U.S.-backed dictatorships, not the autocratic anti-American regimes which have become the focus of the Bush administration and Congressional leaders of both parties.

willing to stand up to demand a shift away from the Bush administration's embrace of the Egyptian dictatorship and other autocratic regimes, its over-reliance on military means to fight terrorism, and its failure to support sustainable economic development in Middle Eastern countries, America's self-destructive policies will likely continue.

*Stephen Zunes is the Middle East editor for Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpif.org) and a professor of Politics at the University of San Francisco and the author of *Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Common Courage Press, 2003).*

FOR MORE ANALYSIS FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS:

The U.S. and Iran: Democracy, Terrorism, and Nuclear Weapons

By Stephen Zunes (July 26, 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/173>

Bush Administration Support for Repression in Uzbekistan Belies Pro-Democracy Rhetoric

By Stephen Zunes (June 20, 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0506uzbekistan.html>

Bush Administration Attacks on Amnesty International: Old Wine, New Bottles

By Stephen Zunes (June 6, 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0506amnesty.html>

Undermining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—It Didn't Start With the Bush Administration

By Stephen Zunes (June 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/pdf/papers/0506undermine.pdf>

Recognizing the Power of Nonviolent Action

By Stephen Zunes (March 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/papers/0503action.html>

Crediting Bush for Growing Lebanese Demands for Freedom Misplaced

By Stephen Zunes (March 22, 2005)
<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0503syr-leb.html>

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "Bombings and Repression in Egypt Underscore Failures in U.S. Anti-Terrorism Strategy," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 11, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/239>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes
Editor: John Gershman, IRC
Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

