Terrorism: America's Response

Recommended Citation

Mushahid Hussain, "Terrorism: America's Response", Special Policy Forum 9/11, September 28, 2001, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/terrorism-americas-response/

September 28, 2001

By Mushahid Hussain

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Mushahid Hussain, an Islamabad-based Syndicated Columnist. Hussain argues that "privatization" of terrorism by non-state actors requires the United States to engage Muslim public opinion to prevent destabilizing otherwise friendly states. While deriding a "credibility gap" in US foreign policy, he also criticizes Muslim states for their lack of resolve in crisis situations. He concludes that Pakistan must not only help to fight terrorism, but work at preventing a larger war.

II. Essay by Mushahid Hussain

Terrorism: America's Response
by Mushahid Hussain

A fortnight after the crisis sparked by the September 11 carnage; the situation provides a mixture of fear and hope. The fear stems from President Bush's declaration of war in his address to the Congress, while the first signs of flexibility have emerged from the Taliban and the military regime in Pakistan has surmounted the initial wave of protests over its policy of supporting the US.

As the Bush speech makes clear, the United States has apparently taken a decision to "punish" the Taliban for providing refuge to Osama bin Laden, but they are not sure as to how and when to do it or what the fallout would be on the US and its allies. On both sides, the United States and the Muslim world, attitudes and policies represent a predictable pattern evident in their interaction with each other for the last several decades.

For the US, terrorism is now outside the ambit of its conventional approach of certifying states as being "sponsors of terrorism" and then going after them through traditional military, diplomatic or economic means. Among the "state sponsors of terrorism" that have been officially certified as such by the US State Department--Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, the Sudan, North Korea and Cuba--none has been formally accused of involvement in the September 11 crime. In fact, barring Iraq, all offered condolences, condemnation and cooperation regarding terrorism.

With the "privatization" of terror by those who are both highly motivated and highly educated, the US is dealing with an enemy that has a demonstrated capacity to kill coupled with a willingness to die. This makes the war on terrorism more complex and the enemy difficult to locate.

The biggest problem that the US faces is on the public opinion front in the Muslim World, most of which is yet to be convinced about the linkage between the September 11 crime and Afghanistan, or the rationale for going to war where the enemy, target or evidence remains undisclosed.

US actions that may be in the offing are, therefore, seen as being guided more by politics than the principle of combating terrorism. Most Muslims perceive that the Bush administration is being pushed to action to assuage the appetite for revenge, retribution and retaliation that is deeply felt within its own people given the scale and enormity of the carnage resulting in thousands of innocent casualties. And poverty- stricken Afghanistan, lacking in any infrastructure, is an easy, convenient and ready target.

In the past too, the US has shown no hesitation or reluctance to "beat the hell out of" small Third World states. Cuba, North Korea, Cambodia, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Libya, Iran, Iraq--even President Clinton's somewhat blatant firing of the "Monica-motivated missiles" on the Sudan and Afghanistan in August 1998 ostensibly to "counter terrorism" at the height of his personal and political crisis. To this day, at least the bombing of the Sudan has never been fully justified.

American foreign policy continues to suffer from a serious credibility gap. For instance, prior to September 11, the United States was seeking to erect a structure of Missile Defence, costing around $100 billion, based on the assumption of a "threat" to American cities from "rogue states" like Iran and North Korea and an unstated but widely-held view among American policymakers and think tanks regarding China as an adversary.

After September 11, both China and Iran are de facto partners of the US on the issue of terrorism. And the biggest irony is that countries in the coalition are being enlisted to fight Frankensteins that US policies unwittingly helped create.

Muslim countries' track record in dealing with crisis situations is not enviable either. They start off with blather, bluster and bravado but then quickly crumble under pressure, because the rhetoric does not match the reality on the ground. Most Muslim nations have not been able to demonstrate staying power for sustained struggle, the only exceptions being irregular but inspired forces like the Afghan Mujahideen against the Red Army, the PLO in the 1982 Battle of Beirut, the Hizbullah against Israel, the Kashmiri freedom fighters or the Bosnian Muslims.

In crises, a checklist of how Muslim states act:

In 1967, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser precipitated the War with Israel by blockading the Gulf of Aqaba and threatening to "push the Jews into the sea" but folded up within 6 days;

In 1971, Pakistan equated the defence of Dhaka with the Siege of Stalingrad but crumbled within a week with most of its military manpower and hardware intact;

In 1973, following a brilliant crossing of the Suez Canal and successful storming of the Barlev Line, Anwar Sadat capitulated after his army was encircled by the Israelis following the emergency American airlift of armaments, promptly ditching his Syrian allies by doing a separate peace with Israel;

In 1979, Iran seized American diplomats and refused to release them although this was a violation of international law, unnecessarily prolonging the hostages crisis thereby prompting the US to push

Saddam to attack Iran, which tied down Iran in a long debilitating war with Iraq for eight years;

In 1991, Saddam could have prevented war by withdrawing his occupation troops from Kuwait, but his obduracy and fool-hardiness caused immense destruction and manifold sufferings for Iraq and its people, with his military might crumbling within 100 hours in the "mother of all battles";

For two years, the Taliban refused its only friend, Pakistan's, pleadings to extradite terrorists that were holed up in Afghanistan after committing crimes in Pakistan. Now, under pressure of attack from America, they promptly did a U-turn on Osama bin Laden by publicly proclaiming him to be an "unwelcome guest" and urging him to leave.

A day before the Afghan Clerics decision to evict Osama from his sanctuary in Afghanistan, General Musharraf in his candid address to the nation delivered what was virtually a requiem for the Taliban, referring to his efforts on their behalf all in the past tense!

Given the stakes involved, Pakistan together with Muslim countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Uzbekistan should pressure the US not to pursue policies that Washington or its Muslim allies will neither be able to control nor cope with. They are likely to feel the maximum and immediate fallout of any American military action that would, in turn, evoke further anti-Americanism in the Muslim World.

Terrorism is very much the premier internal security problem for Muslim countries like Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia, but however the US may define it, the coming "war against terrorism" carries within it germs of a conflict that could be veering to a "clash of civilizations" if Washington were to follow up with its declaration of war with bombing of Afghanistan.

Pakistan is suddenly being showered with goodies: lifting of American sanctions imposed after the May 1998 nuclear tests, doubling of IMF assistance for poverty alleviation to $5 billion, possible debt relief, aid from Japan, a ministerial delegation from the European Union, "thank you" calls from President Bush. It's a sea change for a pariah that has been transformed into a friend within days.

Instead of always moaning about double-standards, which clearly exist in an unequal world still ruled by the "might is right" maxim, Pakistan should avail this opportunity to gets its priorities right and tackle its own terrorist problem, which the military regime has failed to lick in the last two years.

Rather than retreating into a bunker, waiting for the Americans to act in Afghanistan but also fearing the fallout of that action, the military regime should urge dialogue to resolve the crisis treating the Taliban's flexibility on Osama as an opening to pursue the political option. The Pope, the Arab League, President Hosni Mubarak, the European Union, China and influential voices within the American establishment, notably General Colin Powell, all would prefer diplomacy to war. Concurrently, the military regime needs to reach out to all the political forces so that collectively the current crisis can be resolved without any destabilisation. While the protests in Pakistan have been a political plus for the military regime, helping to ward off additional pressure from Washington, these could spin out of control were the US to initiate military action. Hence, Pakistan's twin priorities should be cooperation with the US in combating terrorism, but also preventing war as well.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/special-policy-forum-911/terrorism-amer-cas-response/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org