

THE AFGHAN AFTERMATH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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On 7 October, the United States began military operations against the al-Qaeda terrorist network in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime that had given them shelter. The impact of the US operation upon the Taliban could not be clearer. Just two months after the commencement of bombing, Northern Alliance forces entered the radical Islamist movement's spiritual capital of Kandahar, effectively ending the Taliban's seven-year rule in Afghanistan. However, the repercussions of Operation Enduring Freedom go far beyond the mountains of Afghanistan.

Just as the terrorist attacks of 11 September marked a watershed in the United States' domestic security policy, so too did the subsequent American military campaign inalterably change America's approach toward the Middle East. The reverberations of the campaign to end the Taliban will have an impact on the entire Middle East, Turkey and Israel for years to come.

STABILITY IN AFGHANISTAN

At a 22 January conference in Tokyo, donor nations pledged \$4.5 billion in aid spread over five years to reconstruct Afghanistan. However, declarations of success must be taken with a grain of salt in Afghanistan, for America's defeat of the Taliban and a huge influx of foreign aid do not automatically equate with stability in the war-torn country. Patrick Clawson, Research Director at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, recently noted that whenever foreign aid exceeds 25 percent of a region's gross national product (as it has in Bosnia and for the Palestinian Authority, and as it promises to do in Afghanistan), rampant corruption results. Furthermore, there is no indication that Afghanistan's neighbours will cease interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The prospects for a stable Afghanistan emerging from the rubble of Taliban rule are tenuous at best.

Though Pakistan and its Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI) have been subdued as international attention focuses on Afghanistan's reconstruction, Pakistan has historically opposed nationalist governments in Kabul. After all, throughout the 1950s and 1960s and even into the 1970s, the Afghan government in Kabul supported a Pashtun insurgency in Pakistan, and called for the creation of an independent 'Pashtunistan' to be carved out of Pakistan's territory. The 1972 independence of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) shocked Islamabad into the realisation that Islam alone was not a strong enough bond to hold Pakistan together; ethnic nationalism could be a lethal threat to the integrity of the state. Accordingly, during the 1980s, Pakistan refused to allow Afghan nationalists or royalists to operate on Pakistani soil. The ISI gave permission only to Islamist Afghan resistance groups to operate. Because the ISI controlled the distribution of foreign economic and military assistance to the Mujahidin, this resulted in Islamist groups gaining a huge advantage over royalists and other Afghan nationalists. As a stable Afghanistan represents a continued threat to Pakistani

security, Pakistan will likely strive to keep the government of the royalist interim president, Hamid Karzai, weak.

Just as dangerous to the future stability of the region is the deleterious role Iran appears determined to play in Afghanistan. The high-profile participation of the former Afghan monarch, Zahir Shah, in the aftermath of the Taliban's defeat, frightened many high-level Iranian government officials, who fear creating a precedent for members of Iran's exiled royal family to play a similar reconciliation role. The Iranians are already active in western Afghanistan, an area to which Tehran considers itself to have historical claim (Herat was part of Iran until 1857, when the British Empire forced the Shah to withdraw his forces). Iran is reportedly supporting warlord Ismail Khan, who operates in western Afghanistan. In November, Ismail commented, "Iran is the best model of an Islamic country in the world". US Special Forces operating in the area of Herat reported Iranian agents infiltrating the area. Subsequent reports indicated that Iran's intelligence agency is offering Afghans free Iranian 'school teachers' indicating a further Iranian desire to protect the Islamic Republic's perceived interests at the expense of Afghan stability. Iranian engineers are also active building radio and television transmitters in furtherance of the Islamic Republic's campaign to spread its message into the post-Taliban media void the United States has yet to effectively fill.

SYRIA AND THE TERRORISM SPONSORS

While, according to the annual State Department Patterns of Global Terrorism report, Iran remains "the most active state sponsor of terrorism", Syria is perhaps the one country that must pay the closest attention to the results of the American campaign in Afghanistan. While Afghanistan provided shelter to the deadliest terrorist group in recent history, Syria hosts a number of equally dangerous groups. Even as Syria was elected to the United Nations Security Council on 8 October, ironically a position the United Nations Charter states is to oversee "the maintenance of international peace and security", the Bashir al-Assad regime continued to host more international terrorist groups than any other nation. Hamas opened a new main office in Damascus in March 2000. Also headquartered in Damascus are Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Additionally, Syria granted these groups and others permission to operate camps or safe houses in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, which remains under Syrian domination. While Bashir al-Assad wrote in his condolence message to President Bush in the wake of the 11 September attacks that Syria sought "world-wide co-operation, to uproot terrorism in all its forms", the following month (and just one week before Syria's election to the Security Council), Syria hosted a conference in support of the Palestinian uprising in which Syrian government officials shared the podium with Hizbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, PFLP-GC Chief Ahmad Jibril, Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, and Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mishal.

Damascus realises it is no friend of the United States. The US government has considered Syria a state sponsor of terrorism since the State Department began compiling the list in 1979. Several of the groups Syria hosts are terrorist groups of global reach, many of which have targeted or killed American citizens. For example, Hamas has murdered Americans on at least six occasions, most recently in August 2001 when a Hamas suicide bomber attacked a

Jerusalem pizzeria. In 1995, the PIJ claimed responsibility for two car bombings against Israeli civilian targets that killed eight, including the American citizen Alisa Flatow (whose death became a subject of a multimillion-dollar court case against the Iranian government). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the PFLP often murdered Americans. In March 1970, the PFLP fired seven rockets at American targets in Beirut. The PFLP also organised a 1972 machine gun and grenade attack (carried out by the Japanese Red army) on Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, in which dozens of Americans were killed or injured. The PFLP also killed Americans in 1975 in an attack in Istanbul, and murdered Leon Klinghoffer, a wheelchair-bound American passenger on the hijacked cruise ship, the Achille Lauro, in 1985. Whereas the United States has often failed to react to the murder of its citizens by terrorist groups, the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks indicate that the United States government is no longer willing to be impassive in the face of terror. Even if the diplomats of the State Department urge caution and dialogue, any American administration will be under great public pressure to act. The Bashir al-Assad government in Syria should interpret the US decision not only to attack al-Qaeda, but also to target their Taliban hosts as an indication that Washington will hold Damascus responsible for the deaths of any American citizens at the hands of groups hosted by the Syrian government.

Despite classifying Syria as a sponsor of terrorism, senior State Department diplomats still seek to engage Syria. According to an October 2001 essay by Robert Satloff, Executive Director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Secretary of State Colin Powell reportedly struck a deal with the Syrian government during his March 2001 visit to Damascus in which Powell promised that the US government would not seek to block Syria's accession to the Security Council, if Syria would in turn stop allowing Iraq to illegally export its oil outside of United Nations financial mechanisms, a commitment which Assad has not fulfilled. Many in the Pentagon and other policymaking organs within the US government already favour a tougher attitude toward Damascus, pointing out the lesson learned from Turkey's 1998 confrontation with Syria. Damascus had long hosted Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), a group guilty of widespread terrorism as part of its violent separatist campaign in neighbouring Turkey. In 1998, the Turkish government decided it has had enough, and mobilised its army in preparation for possible retaliation against Syria. Damascus responded by ordering Öcalan out of the country (less than four months after which Turkish commandos captured him and brought him to trial on the prison island of İmralı, 55 kilometres south of Istanbul).

Indeed, following President Bush's 20 September 2001 statement that "any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime", Syria did co-operate in a limited way in US anti-terror efforts. For example, Syrian security forces reportedly arrested four Syrian nationals and several foreigners allegedly affiliated with al-Qaeda. Additionally, the Syrian government did share some intelligence on people and organisations suspected of al-Qaeda links and allowed a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent to visit Aleppo to question associates of 11 September hijacker Muhammad Atta. However, Syria continues to host, supply and encourage numerous terrorist groups that will guarantee Syria's continued classification as a state sponsor of terrorism.

In the context of the new US willingness to go after the sponsors of terrorism, the group which is now most dangerous to host is Hizbollah, an organisation to which Syria still provides financial and material support as well as a safe-haven. Hizbollah is not merely, as some Middle Eastern officials and even Western diplomats maintain, a political party or a legitimate liberation struggle. Rather, Lebanese Hizbollah has a long history of violent action

against both civilians and peacekeepers. While Osama bin Laden may be the American government's most wanted terrorist, many present and former Central Intelligence Agency officials and counter terrorism specialists consider Imad Mughniyeh to be the most dangerous man alive. Who exactly is Mughniyeh? He was a founding member of Lebanese Hizbollah, and reportedly directed both Hizbollah's security wing and its overseas operations. However, Mughniyeh's trail of blood has shown that Hizbollah is not merely some resistance army engaged in a struggle against Israel, as many of apologists like to assert. Mughniyeh is suspected of planning the suicide attacks against the US embassy in Beirut in 1983, as well as both the American and French marine barracks later that same year (by targeting the peacekeepers, Mughniyeh fulfilled Hizbollah's and their Iranian sponsors' objective of prolonging the Lebanese civil war). Beginning in 1984, Mughniyeh masterminded a series of kidnappings of several Westerners and is alleged to have personally tortured and murdered William Buckley, the Central Intelligence Agency Station Chief in Beirut. In 1985, he participated in the hijacking to Beirut of a TWA passenger jet en route to Rome from Athens. During the course of the ensuing 17-day hostage seizure, the hijackers murdered an American passenger. In 1992, Mughniyeh planned the car bomb attack on the Israel embassy in Argentina. Lest any apologists claim that Hizbollah's struggle against Israel is merely political and therefore legitimate, Mughniyeh showed his true colours again in Buenos Aires in 1994, when he orchestrated the bomb attack on the Jewish cultural centre. Most recently, Mughniyeh's name surfaced as the facilitator for a shipment of 50-tons of Iranian arms the Palestinian Authority ordered, but which the Israeli military intercepted in the Red Sea. Jane's Intelligence Review reported that Israeli military intelligence analysts still consider Mughniyeh to be the mastermind of the World Trade Centre attacks.

WILL IRAQ BE PHASE II OR PHASE III?

While US-Iraqi relations have been strained for more than a decade, the events of 11 September have significantly strengthened American resolve to counter the strategic threat Saddam Hussein poses. Many Western commentators and European diplomats cite a lack of international backing for any American military action in Iraq, especially since no proof has emerged that Iraq was in any way behind the 11 September terrorist attacks. Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister told TASS on 21 December 2001, for example, that military action against Iraq "will only fan up tension in the region, since there's no proof of Iraq's complicity in the attacks in the United States". Even erstwhile American ally Great Britain has expressed reservations. Speaking on the Qatar-based Arabic language news service al-Jazeera on 16 October, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw declared that war would not spread beyond Afghanistan without "irrefutable evidence".

Such concerns may very well be irrelevant to the debate as to whether Iraq should become a target of the war against terror. President Bush has charged the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency not simply to investigate the responsibility for the attacks of 11 September, but rather to concentrate on preventing future attacks. Accordingly, the determinant for action against Iraq will be the future threat Saddam Hussein poses rather than any proof of responsibility he holds for the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks.

Iraq's refusal to express regret or condolence for the events of 11 September only enhances the American perception that the Iraqi leader poses a threat and that, at the very least, he endorses terror. More important, however, is Saddam's history. The Iraqi leader has started two regional wars that have resulted in the deaths of upwards of one million people.

Additionally, in a ten-month orgy of violence in 1988, Saddam murdered an estimated 182,000 Iraqi civilians, mostly Kurdish but also other non-Arab minorities like the Turkmen. During the Kuwait conflict, Saddam threatened to use weapons of mass destruction against coalition forces. It was because of these threats that the Security Council, in Resolution 687 mandated that Iraq “shall unconditionally accept” the destruction under international supervision of all biological and chemical weapons, and ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 kilometres. To verify this requirement, Resolution 687 authorised on-site UN inspections. This provided the basis for the formation of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) charged with verifying the destruction of Iraq’s nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programme.

Iraq has consistently refused to adhere to the United Nations resolutions that marked the cease-fire ending the Persian Gulf War. Swedish Ambassador and UNSCOM Chief Rolf Ekeus reported that, as UNSCOM began to investigate Iraq’s methods of concealing its retained weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities, Iraq increased its resistance to inspections in direct contradiction to its commitments. Not only does the Iraqi government refuse to allow UN inspectors to verify the end of its WMD programme, but the Iraqi government also insists that it has a right to develop nuclear weapons. An editorial in the 21 January 2002 official daily Babil, edited by Saddam’s son Uday, opined that “possessing such weapons constitutes a right of self-defence and a necessity of national security, whether anyone likes it or not”.

Under international law, if Iraq does not adhere to its commitments, then the cease-fire marking the end of American-led action against Iraq could become null and void. UN Security Council Resolution 687 is also broad enough to justify further action against Iraq. This resolution authorises UN member states “to use all necessary means to uphold and implement Resolution 660 (1990) and all subsequent relevant resolutions and to restore international peace and security in the area.”

Simply put, the Bush administration may determine that the status quo in Iraq – with the erosion of sanctions, the absence of inspectors in the face of Saddam’s continued nuclear ambitions, as well as Saddam’s entrenchment of his son Qusay Saddam for succession – is untenable and that Iraq will increasingly pose a threat to US national security and the security of American civilians at home and abroad. Accordingly, the Bush administration may feel that military action, the option of last resort, is the only realistic means to force Saddam to obey his international commitments.

Such military action will likely have fallout elsewhere in the region. While many pundits argue that US intervention in Iraq could cause chaos in Arab capitals, such fear is overblown. Protests diminished, rather than increased, as the United States continued its bombing of Afghanistan. From interviews I conducted in Iraq during my residence there in 2000 - 2001, it was clear that few Iraqis supported Saddam Hussein, and Iraqi military morale was low. Images of Iraqis embracing American soldiers will go a long way to mollifying hostile reaction on the Arab street. Rather, the real impact of a sustained American military strike on Iraq would be upon Israel, Turkey and, perhaps, pro-American Arab governments like Kuwait. Many Israelis, for example, fully believe that they will become the target of Iraqi missile and chemical weapon attacks.

TURKEY AS A TARGET

One of the most important characteristics of the al-Qaeda network has been its ability to transcend nationality to a far greater extent than traditional terrorist organisations, such as those associated with the Palestinians, Kurds or Kashmiris. Osama bin Laden attracted a large following, drawn not only by his spectacular assaults, but also by his money and, as is clear in retrospect, the inadequate US government response during the eight-year Clinton administration. When former Defence Intelligence Agency analyst Julie Sirrs visited a prison in territory held by the late Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masood in 1997, she found Yemenis, Uygur Chinese and Pakistani fighters. When I visited Kabul in March 2000, local residents spoke of having seen numerous Pakistanis and Filipinos “here for Jihad”. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime and the mass surrender of al-Qaeda fighters in Kunduz on 26 November, numerous other nationalities – Chechens, Algerians, Saudis, several Europeans, Australians and an American – turned up. While the American military continues to detain scores of suspected al-Qaeda members at its base Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, at some point in the future, they will likely be released. Numerous other non-Afghan al-Qaeda members and proponents of terror, escaped Afghanistan across the porous frontiers with Pakistan or Iran. These foreign disciples of Osama bin Laden, subscribing to an uncompromising and extremely violent Islamist ideology, will not simply evaporate. Rather, they will pose a threat for years to come, as they either return to their own countries to gather new recruits into their cells, or seek out fertile ground elsewhere in the region.

An indication of what is to come has apparently already occurred outside the spotlight of the world press. On 11 September, a new, fiercely militant Islamist group erupted onto the scene half a world away from New York and Washington. As people across the world remained glued to their television screens showing unbelievable scenes of destruction in the United States, the Jund al-Islam (Army of Islam) seized the strategic Shinirwe Mountain overlooking the town of Halabja in northern Iraq. Less than two weeks later, the group launched a full-scale destabilisation campaign. In a bloody assault on the secular Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which administers a large portion of northern Iraq, members of the Jund al-Islam not only massacred, but also beheaded and ritually mutilated 43 PUK militia members. Plots to assassinate leading secular politicians in northern Iraq were only narrowly averted.

Could al-Qaeda have targeted northern Iraq? Apparently, yes. Like Afghanistan, northern Iraq is mountainous and inaccessible. Roads are poor. The violent Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has often taken refuge in the region’s mountains and caves to hide both from the Turkish military and Iraqi Kurdish militia. Other groups seeking to overthrow the Turkish government for religious rather than ethnic reasons have also sought to establish themselves in northern Iraq. In January 2001, for example, PUK intelligence reported that the virulently anti-secularist Kaplanist movement had (with Iranian assistance) established a base in northern Iraq for the purpose of agitating against the Turkish Republic.

Saudi money and Iranian arms flow into the region across porous borders. A captured Jund al-Islam internal leaflet declared, “There are a number of reasons for initiating Jihad within [Iraqi] Kurdistan borders. The geographic location with its mountainous terrain is suitable and has strategic value within Islamic Jihad. Another reason is that this nation is descended from Salahuddin Ayyubi (May Allah Bless Him) who historically achieved victory for Islam and Muslims [against the Crusaders]”.

With their presence no longer tolerated in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda members will seek to regroup and re-establish themselves elsewhere in the region. While Somalia and Sudan provide geographic isolation as well as the safety afforded by weak or complicit governments,

northern Iraq also provides fertile territory, especially as Iran, Iraq and Syria have strong track records of supporting terrorism for both ideological and geopolitical reasons. Additionally, proximity to Turkey affords any radical Islamists establishing themselves in northern Iraq an attractive target around which to rally. Many of the Taliban fighters held prisoner by Ahmad Shah Masood reported that they had been told that Masood was really an atheist. If Masood, a fervently religious Sunni, could be so-labelled, so could any politician in secular and democratic Turkey. Any reassertion of Iraqi government control over northern Iraq will likely play into Islamist groups' and the PKK's hands, as such a move by Baghdad would only re-ignite Iraqi Kurdish guerrilla activity, creating the very chaos which Iran, al-Qaeda and the PKK are only too willing to exploit.

SAUDI ARABIA

Perhaps the most dramatic shift in regional dynamics following the 11 September attacks has been a marked deterioration in the US-Saudi relationship. American commentators and policymakers have asked publicly what previously had only been whispered in back corridors. Former CIA Director James Woolsey, for example, called Saudi Arabia's role in sponsorship of terrorism "extremely troubling". Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, writing in the New Yorker, revealed that the National Security Agency had for seven years recorded intercepts of conversations among members of the Saudi royal family. These intercepts, Hersh wrote, "depict a regime increasingly corrupt, alienated from the country's religious rank and file, and so weakened and frightened that it has brokered its future by channelling hundreds of millions of dollars in what amounts to protection money to fundamentalist groups that wish to overthrow it". Hersh continues to reveal proof that Saudi money had strongly supported Osama bin Laden's activities in Afghanistan. Even after 11 September, the Saudi royal family refused to co-operate with freezing the assets of bin Laden and his associates.

The Saudi press has responded with vitriol to the American debate, providing even more ammunition to American policymakers who wish to downgrade the United States' relationship with the Saudi kingdom. For example, al-Watan columnist Abd al-Muhsin Hilal complained on 10 November, "America tried to abolish the precept considered the best of all our religion's precepts, that is, Jihad against the aggressors and the plunderers of rights. With the stroke of a pen, America tries to transform a divine ruling into incitement and terrorism". The same day, columnist Muhammad ben Ali al-Harafi complained that Thomas Friedman, in particular, was simply spewing Jewish propaganda. The daily al-Riyadh on 27 November 2001 complained of "the obstacles posed by the American media [which] separate the Arabs and America".

On 18 January 2002, the Washington Post reported that the Saudi royal family might soon ask the United States military to evacuate its military presence in the country. While senior Saudi officials argue that the United States has 'overstayed its welcome', many American policymakers consider the Saudis increasingly ungrateful and would be eager to scale back relations with a country Human Rights Watch calls "a veritable wasteland when it comes to respect for fundamental human rights". Senator Carl Levin (Democrat, Michigan), Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, commented on 16 January 2002, "It seems to me we should find a place that is more hospitable. The Saudis actually think somehow they are doing us a favour by having us be there helping to defend them".

Apart from the question over whether the United States will scale-back or withdraw its presence in Saudi Arabia, the fracturing of Washington's relationship with Riyadh could have reverberations throughout the region. The US is currently tied to an increasingly unfriendly and uncooperative Saudi regime because of America's dependence upon Persian Gulf oil. The

United States cannot afford simultaneous estrangement with Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. However, if American policymakers feel they need room to manoeuvre with Riyadh, then they must accelerate their policy to counter the threat posed by Saddam once and for all. Ironically, Saudi Arabia's squeamishness about the United States' containment of Saddam may be a primary catalyst in any American action against Iraq.

The United States may also increasingly shift her attention toward the Caucasus and Central Asia (a process evidently already begun with the foundation of a more permanent US military presence in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan). Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are awash in oil, albeit both of a lesser quality and more difficult to bring to market than that found in the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, as the Saudi monarchy is increasingly viewed as at best a fair-weather friend and at worst a foe, the Western-oriented, secular republic of Azerbaijan looks increasingly attractive. In the words of Brenda Shaffer, Director of Caspian Studies at Harvard University, "Flows of large volumes of Caspian oil through non-OPEC countries would erode the power of OPEC, as well as its ability to use oil as a mode of political blackmail". If the diplomatic disruption 11 September caused continues long enough, American policymakers might very well shift their diplomatic and financial attention northward. Indeed, the US Congress and Bush administration are already beginning to pave the way for greater American involvement in Azerbaijan, deciding in October to waive Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act, which had imposed unilateral US sanctions on that country.

CONCLUSIONS

The impact of 11 September and the subsequent war against terrorism will be far reaching for the Middle East. While some pundits predicted that the war against terror might provide reason for rapprochement between the United States and rogue regimes, the desire on the part of Colin Powell and the State Department's policy planning staff to create as broad as possible a coalition against terror have failed. The Bush administration and the broader American policy community seem to realise that no amount of rhetoric can justify support for rogue regimes who have not substantively scaled-back their support for terror. Simply put, the enemy of thy enemy is not always a friend.

Indeed, rather than decrease tensions in the region, the US operations against the Taliban will likely accelerate future conflict. The fall of the Taliban has demonstrated that the nature of warfare has changed. The United States was able to topple a terror-sponsoring regime, while relying primarily upon air power, a small number of Special Forces and a local resistance. Already, there is talk of replicating the operation against Iraq, where 70,000 Kurds already are under arms, and numerous Shia and Sunni Arabs would likely rise in revolt against Saddam if provided with adequate air power. Accordingly, as US policymakers shake-off for good the Vietnam syndrome, the political threshold necessary to initiate combat has decreased. Indeed, should the United States again fall victim to terrorism, domestic political pressure will likely demand an equal response to that which crumbled the Taliban. Unfortunately, as polarisation and demography increases in the Middle East, the likelihood of terrorism against not only the United States, but also other Western-oriented democracies like Israel and Turkey makes such a scenario likely.