

Worldwide Terrorism, Part 2

By William R. Polk

In my previous article, I described the inspiration for Islamic resistance to the West and how opposition to Soviet imperialism coalesced the main movement in Afghanistan. Here I will deal with the conflict between Usama bin Ladin's *al-Qa'idah* organization and the West.

While it figured as the main enemy to the Chechens and Afghans, the Soviet Union was always marginal to many of the adherents of *al-Qa'idah*. It was the legacy of Western imperialism that caught their attention and the rise of America to dominance that made it their principal target. So once the Russians had been pushed out of Afghanistan, the people whom the anti-Communists had thought of as "freedom fighters" began a series of attacks on American targets. In 1996, they attacked an American installation in Saudi Arabia and the World Trade Center in New York; in 1998, they hit American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; and on September 11, 2001, they carried out spectacular attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The American government regarded these attacks as acts of war and determined to crush not only *al-Qa'idah* but also their sponsors, the Taliban government of Afghanistan. This was the origin of the Afghan war of 2001.

The war was quick and dirty. Afghan casualties were proportionally enormous; most of the modern infrastructure of the country was destroyed; and, worse, whatever basis for national cohesion that existed among the variety of Afghan minorities was shattered. As anarchy has spread, warlords arose, robberies and rapes became common

and the economy stagnated, there are signs of a renewed popularity of the Taliban and their *al-Qa'idah* allies. The use of massive military force turned out to have an effect like the pruning of a bush or vine: after being cut back, the movement put out new growth and spread.

Today, as the American government has been shown, *al-Qa'idah* is but one branch of movements with roots in many Muslim countries. More than a dozen similar groups have been identified and perhaps four times that many are thought to exist. An all-party committee of the English Parliament proclaimed last summer, the invasion of Iraq may have driven more than 17,000 Muslims in some 60 countries to identify with *al-Qa'idah*.ⁱ

These groups probably represent only a small portion of those across the Afro-Asian world who share their sentiments. Thus, when American forces assassinate "enemy combatants", as President Bush has authorized the CIA to do,ⁱⁱ new recruits come forward. Violent suppression, as Philips Wilcox, the former head of U.S. "Counterterrorism," has notedⁱⁱⁱ, is likely to cause others "to carry out even more dangerous acts of terrorism; the effect could well be to increase recruitment..."

It is already happening. There is a vast pool from which terrorists can draw recruits and supporters. Not only in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, the Philippines, and other embattled countries, but even in countries which Western governments regard as friends or allies, they encounter much hostility. In recent months, the Pew Research Center polled some 38,000 people in 44 countries and found that 78% of the Turks, 81% of the Pakistanis and 84% of the Egyptians were opposed to the spread of Western ideas. What were they willing to do to stop that spread? 73% of the

Lebanese, 43% of the Jordanians, 47% of the Nigerians, 33% of the Pakistanis and 27% of the Indonesians approved even of suicide bombings.^{iv}

Suicide bombing is today regarded by most of us with horror. But it has long been used by those who are desperate and feel that they have no other means of action. In previous articles I have cited a number of examples in Europe and America. Suicide bombing combines both attack and martyrdom. And martyrdom – what Muslims call “seeking to be a witness [for God]” *istashhada* -- has a venerated tradition of Christianity where it is the basis of sainthood.

Istashhada is the means to overcome military defeat and fear of assassination. When men and women are willing to give up their lives in their cause, they are not deterred by threats or violent action. Thus, “the war on terror” has not prevented a constant stream of volunteers to dozens of groups like *al-Qa'idah*, *Hamas*, *Jihad ul-Islamiyah*, *Jama'ah Islamiyah* and *Ansar-ul-Islam*.

Indeed, it is evident that the “pruning” of the Taliban government of Afghanistan and Usama bin Ladin’s followers there and brutal suppression in both Iraq and Palestine have spread rather than contained terrorism. As General James L. Jones, USMC, then head of the American European command said, “As we pursue the global war on terrorism...large uncontrolled, ungoverned areas [of Africa, Asia and Latin America] are going to be potential havens for that kind of activity.”^v His comment was substantiated by a U.S. Army War College report (published last month) maintaining that the American “global war on terrorism” is “dangerously indiscriminate and ambitious [and] threatens to dissipate U.S. military resources [which are now scattered in 130 countries] in an endless and hopeless search for absolute security.”

From the day that President Bush referred to the American campaign as a “crusade,” a word loaded with historical meaning for the Islamic world, American officials and religious leaders have identified Islam as the root cause of terrorism. Implementing this attitude will set in motion a chain reaction: each attack will lead to reprisals which will justify further armed action; the result will almost certainly be unending war, just as the Bush administration’s neoconservatives seem to want. In force alone, there may be temporary respite, or a series of respites in the same or different areas, but no solution.

A major field in this now world-wide military campaign against “terrorism” is, of course, Iraq. There, Egyptian President Husni Mubarrak prophesized, American dominance would create “a hundred Bin Ladins.” Whether this is overly pessimistic or not, it is clear that America has got itself into a guerrilla war that is more an Iraqi national cause than, as the Bush administration has claimed, just a police against a small group of “die-hard Baathists.”

As it has proven unable to defeat these people, the American military and civil administrators are – ironically -- flirting with a program to turn over power in Iraq to Islamic fundamentalists.

If force does not work, as it has not anywhere, and if the American policy in Iraq and Afghanistan appears to be self-defeating, what can be done about terrorism?

A sensible answer cannot be simple; nor can it satisfy the desire for a “quick fix.” It must be long term. At minimum it involves three courses of action:

First, obviously, Western societies must take all reasonable precautions to defend themselves against violence. We will have to live with annoying government intrusions

into our freedom while we attempt to limit them to actions that are absolutely necessary and self-evidently justified. We must be wary that we not lose the way of life we wish to maintain by the very act of defending it. We must also realize that whatever police actions we take will not “solve” the problem of terrorism. For any who are in doubt, regard the Israeli experience in Palestine: no matter how overwhelming the force, no matter how intrusive the repression, no matter how restrictive the prohibitions, Israel is less secure today than any time in the past.

The second action is strategic. America and other Western governments must act in ways that will wean away from the terrorists those who support them. Only if the fighters lose their support – what Mao Tse-tung called “the sea” in which the “fish” must swim -- will terrorism become vulnerable. Established governments can win this part of their campaign only if they stand for what the poorer, often suppressed Muslims see as justice, freedom and decency. As Joseph P. Hoar, a retired U.S. Marine Corps general, testified before the American Senate Armed Services Committee, “...the war on terrorism will be won only when we convince 1 billion Muslims that we are, in fact, a just society; that we do support peace, justice, equality for all people...” This is the most important aspect of any attempt to restrain terrorism.

The third action must address the widely held belief that Western governments and industry create and support puppet regimes that are corrupt tyrannies. Those who wish to encourage the supporters of terrorism to stop aiding them must apply the criteria of the rule of law, support for human dignity and striving for the well-being of their peoples. Too often, Western states have associated themselves with, and therefore have been tainted by, corrupt, tyrannical regimes in the pursuit of short-term objectives.

America did this with Saddam Husain, to whom it supplied the war materials with which he tyrannized and massacred his own people and invaded Kuwait; it has done similar things in Latin America. Thus, it has made itself “the friend of the enemy” and so the target of attack not only by terrorists but by many who should have been its true allies.

Americans will be tempted to say that the dangers it now faces justify actions that demean their principles while their European allies will be tempted to avoid taking independent stands that risk annoying the Americans, as the French did in the run-up to the Iraq invasion. But the long-term price for such short-term policies could be even greater than terrorism itself and almost certainly will not defeat it.

The road back from the slippery slope on which not just America but the entire West are losing prestige and friendship will not be easy nor will our journey be quick; so we had better begin as soon as possible.

ⁱ *The Independent*, August 1, 2003. Vice President Dick Cheney agreed with the numbers, but not with the cause.

ⁱⁱ *The Guardian*, December 16, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ (*The New York Review of Books*, September 19, 2001)

^{iv} Peter Preston, “Can might alone earn a nation love, trust?” *The Guardian*, December 10, 2002. Meanwhile, the poll found that 80% of Americans believe they consider the wishes of others and that American ideas should spread everywhere.

^v Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Seeking New Access Pacts for Africa Bases,” *NYT*, July 5, 2003.

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