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Terrorism – Causes and Consequences

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« Terrorists » and « terrorism » have become Washington's monomania since 9/11, guiding the foreign/military policies of the American superstate and holding its population in thrall.

"The single biggest threat to U.S. security, both short-term, medium-term and long-term," President Barack Obama said April 11, is the possibility that terrorists might obtain a nuclear weapon. The second biggest threat to world history's mightiest military state, it goes without saying, are terrorists without nuclear weapons but armed with box-cutters, rifles or homemade explosives.

It's « terrorism » 24/7 in the United States — the product of a conscious effort by the Bush Administration to keep the American people in the constant clutches of existential fear, in large part to justify launching endless aggressive wars. Anything goes if the target is said to be « terrorism, » as long as the Pentagon's violence takes place in smaller, weaker countries usually populated by non-Europeans.

But does the U.S. government really want to defeat terrorism? This is a serious question. All its major efforts so far have been focused on the effects of terrorism but not on its much more profound causes. In this article we shall discuss the causes, particularly the actions of the U.S. in the Middle East over the decades which contributed significantly to the rise of terror as a weapon.

After almost a decade, the Bush Administration's « War on Terrorism » — at a cost of trillions of dollars, the erosion of a substantial portion of America's civil liberties and its worldwide reputation, and the deaths of over a million foreign civilians — has not succeeded in its stated objectives.

And yet, judging by the Obama Administration's 2011 war budget request, the recently released Quadrennial Defense Report and the Nuclear Posture report, and the widening of the wars, it is clear that President Barack Obama has no intention of deviating significantly from President George W. Bush's unjust and failed policies.

President Obama's troop buildup, implied nuclear threats against Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and his order to the CIA to assassinate an American citizen without a trial are but some of the most recent examples.

All that's really changed in national security strategy from one administration to the other is the name of Bush's « War on Terrorism. » The Obama Administration renamed it, in an

excess of bureaucratese, an « Overseas Contingency Operation, » transforming its title to suggest it was a mere budget item. Not so mere, actually, since the Pentagon's annual war budget has risen 67% since 9/11.

American national security policy since the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center nearly nine years ago has been aimed primarily at defeating a small number of ill-equipped non-state « terrorist » enemies by fielding a large professional army with advanced technology first to Afghanistan, then Iraq and now back to the Afghan theater with tributaries extending into Pakistan, Yemen and to a lesser extent Somalia and the Philippines.

Fewer than 100 al-Qaeda operatives are in Afghanistan against about 94,000 U.S. troops, so far, plus 40,000 NATO soldiers, and about 100,000 mostly higher paid « contractors » performing military duties. There are up to 15,000 part- and full-time irregulars associated with the Afghan Taliban, perhaps fewer. But — even though they are ultra-conservative religious extremists who were oppressive when in power — they are a national force with no designs on the United States, and are not technically terrorists but defenders of their country from foreign invasion. Many Americans don't like to hear that, of course.

The Bush-Obama anti-terrorism policy has two aspects, one public, the other concealed. The public aspect is to « keep America safe » from specifically Arab and more broadly Muslim « terrorists. » The concealed aspect is to utilize the 9/11 tragedy to justify the projection of military might to extend U.S. hegemony throughout the oil-rich Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region, and into geostrategic Central Asia through the occupation of Afghanistan.

We shall here discuss the public aspect, and why it was and continues to be the wrong response to 9/11, beginning with a paragraph from the Sept. 15, 2001, Activist Newsletter:

« Tuesday's deplorable terror attacks did not occur in a political vacuum, despite the mass media's effort to depict the events as simply the product of Middle Eastern 'madmen' with 'no regard for human life' driven by fundamentalist religious beliefs to hate the United States. In reality, Washington's role in the Middle East, which it has dominated since the end of World War II to control the region's vast petroleum resources, must be carefully examined to determine the roots of our present situation…. Many Americans ask, 'Why do they hate us so?' The honest answer to that question points the way toward a solution to the 'terrorism' crisis. »

Never once in all these years has the U.S. government acknowledged that its decades of interference in the region were a major factor in the growth of « terrorism, » the existence of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, and the 9/11 attacks. Washington is hardly unaware of the connection — and indeed of the primacy of its own historic provocation in the region — but in the era of government deception and corporate domination of the mass media, « inconvenient » truths usually remain concealed from the masses of people.

Five Major Decisions

Washington implemented five major decisions during the last 65 years that turned public opinion in the Middle East against the United States and largely generated the conditions that led to the creation of al-Qaeda, jihadist warriors, and suicide bombers. We will describe these causes which ultimately led to the effects called terrorism, then, in part 3, conclude

with brief « modest » proposals to rectify the situation.

(1) The first of these decisions took place immediately following the end of World War II in 1945, when the U.S. chose to extend its hegemony throughout the Middle East, and thus prevent its essential wartime ally, the Soviet Union, from gaining a foothold. Washington's goal ever since that time — including the last two decades after the implosion of the socialist camp and the 16 months since Obama took office — has been directed toward establishing dominion over this petroleum-rich region to insure America's global preeminence.

To accomplish this objective, the U.S. made deals with ultra-conservative monarchies in the region, offering them military protection and secure dynastic longevity in return for loyalty and concessions on oil supplies. Royal houses, such as exist in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and elsewhere, could have been swept away decades ago by their own people had they not been in America's protective custody. Washington's prolongation of monarchical rule has been a major impediment to democracy in the region.

When the people prevailed, as in Iran in 1951 after an elected democratic government gained power, nationalized the country's substantial petroleum reserves, and replaced the monarchy with a republic, the U.S. and Britain launched a campaign for bloody regime change that by 1953 crushed democracy and restored the brutal Shah of Iran to power.

Washington also continually interfered with republics, not just monarchies, supporting, protecting and enriching those which destroyed their political left wing and bent the knee to U.S. hegemony, such as Egypt, while subverting those leaning left, as in Iran in the early 1950s, or who simply insisted upon maintaining independence from American domination, such as Syria. This, too, stifled democracy and social progress.

After 65 years of interference, Washington either controls or has considerable influence over virtually all the governments of the Middle East, with the exception of Iran, today's imperial target par excellence. Syria remains in the middle. Turkey, which is sometimes not geographically included in the Middle East, is a member of U.S.-dominated NATO and seeks Washington's support to enter the European Union, but has lately taken two positions totally opposed by the Obama Administration: It has sharply criticized Israel, which was considered Turkey's ally, over its invasion and imprisonment of Gaza, and this month joined with Brazil in a move calculated to head off harsh sanctions against Iran.

In the process of gaining dominance over most Mideast regimes — the majority of which have remained undemocratic as a consequence — the United States has alienated the masses of people throughout the region.

In response, given that the U.S. has demanded of its Arab protectorates that the political left and progressive secular forces be weakened or crushed in country after country, it has been the Islamic resistance which has filled the vacuum and taken up the national struggle against American domination and undemocratic rule. A relatively small portion of this movement is influenced by extreme fundamentalist ideology, and a still smaller sector have joined the jihad (struggle) initiated by Osama bin-Laden's al-Qaeda.

(2) The second decision that contributed principally to creating Arab and Muslim antipathy toward the U.S. was Washington's total support of Israel to the detriment of the people of Palestine, particularly following the June 1967 war, when Israel invaded and occupied large

swaths of Palestinian territory, where it remains today in utter violation of several key international laws.

« In Palestine, » according to British writer/filmmaker John Pilger, « the enduring illegal occupation by Israel would have collapsed long ago were it not for U.S. backing. Far from being the terrorists of the world, the Islamic peoples have been its victims.… It is only a few years ago that the Islamic fundamentalist groups, willing to blow themselves up in Israel and New York, were formed, and only after Israel and the U.S. had rejected outright the hope of a Palestinian state, and justice for a people scarred by imperialism."

Today, the Arab world agrees to normalize relations with Israel if the Tel Aviv government allows the establishment of two sovereign states, one being Palestinian. Israel refuses, and not only continues to illegally occupy Palestinian lands but to oppress the masses of people — the most gruesome recent example being the vicious attack on Gaza followed by blockading the territory to deprive its inhabitants of the basic necessities of life.

It is well understood that only U.S. military, economic and political support makes it possible for Israel to continuously subjugate the Palestinians. Israel often claims it is surrounded by « existential » threats of one kind or another, the latest being from Iran, but the only real threat it faces is that of losing Washington's sponsorship, protection and economic support.

(3) The third Washington decision that led to 9/11 — and in this case directly — was to involve the U.S. in the Afghan civil war that erupted in 1978 after the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), backed by the Afghan army and military officers, seized power and began to enact reforms to « bring Afghanistan into the 20th century. » The reforms — including substantial freedoms for women — aroused armed opposition from conservative Islamic war lords and fighting groups.

The U.S. began supporting these groups clandestinely in 1979 with great infusions of money and war materials, prompting the USSR to send troops to defend the leftist government. Both al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban developed out of this struggle, receiving American support in the process.

The Soviets were fought to a standstill and withdrew in 1989, but the left wing government managed to hold on until it was brutally crushed in 1992. The civil war then transformed into a war for control of Afghanistan between several of the strongest rebel groups. It lasted four years, and resulted in victory for the ultra-orthodox Taliban in 1996. Al-Qaeda used Afghanistan as one of its bases until the U.S. invasion in October 2001, then fled to western Pakistan. (A 2-part account of « The U.S. in Afghanistan, » including « The Origins of a Bad War, » were published in the November 5, 2009, issue of the Activist Newsletter, available in the blog archive.)

(4) The fourth U.S. decision that contributed substantially to the unpopularity of the American government was to impose cruel sanctions against the Iraqi people in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. The war itself, resulting in the mortification of Iraq for occupying Kuwait, was intended to compensate for the Pentagon's humiliating defeat in Vietnam 15 years earlier. The U.S. launched what has been called one of the « most devastating air assaults in history » against Iraq in mid-January 1991. It was all over in a couple of months. Overwhelming power succeeded: The U.S. lost 147 troops. The Iraqis lost 200,000, troops and civilians in the brief war and its immediate aftermath.

Ultimately up to 1.5 million Iraqis died as a result of a dozen years of draconian U.S./UN economic, trade and materials sanctions that accompanied the war, and which ended only after the U.S. invasion in March 2003. The UN suggests that half these civilian dead were children. Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, a defender of the Iraqi people, said of the sanctions, « The goal was to cripple Iraq's infrastructure and make civilian life unsustainable." (His 1992 book, « The Fire This Time — U.S. War Crimes in the Gulf, » remains a classic account of the real causes and effects of the Gulf War.)

Most Americans were and remain indifferent to the terrible pain visited upon the Iraqi people by the sanctions. Secretary of State Madeline Albright famously said of the civilian deaths, « we think the price is worth it. » To the Arab people, Muslims in general, humanitarians, and anti-imperialists throughout the world, it was a cruel and vindictive act of genocidal proportions.

(5) The fifth decision was to respond to the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the U.S. by bombing and invading Afghanistan, instead of relying on international police work to capture al-Qaeda, a small, non-state, quasi-military organization dedicated to « propaganda of the deed, » with cells in several countries in addition to its Afghan component.

Bush's decision to launch a war was precisely what al-Qaeda wanted to further discredit the U.S. in Arab eyes. The Bush Administration's subsequent decision to invade Iraq — which was completely innocent of involvement in 9/11 and extremely weak militarily because of the sanctions — compounded the original miscalculation of invading Afghanistan. Secular President Saddam Hussein was probably fundamentalist al-Qaeda's principal ideological enemy in the Arab world, and Washington ordered his execution. Meanwhile, the Iraqi national resistance forced the world's only military superpower into a humiliating stalemate, another fact about which the U.S. public is blissfully ignorant.

The Iraq war itself, now seven years old, has killed another million Iraqi people and created at least four million refugees. Between the sanctions and the war, the U.S. has killed roughly 2.5 million Iraqis — almost 10% of the population. This does not seem to have penetrated the consciousness, much less the conscience, of the thoroughly propagandized American people. The only winner of Bush's imperialist misadventure in Iraq was neighboring Shi'ite Iran, which had viewed Hussein's Ba'athist Sunni regime as its main enemy.

President Obama's decision to widen the Afghan war and to penetrate Pakistan and Yemen has once again played into al-Qaeda's hands, and continues to increase anti-U.S. views on the part of the Arab masses. The good will Obama generated throughout the Muslim world by his warm, peaceful, convincing and ultimately deceptive words in Cairo a year ago has dissipated. His actions have strengthened the tiny splinter of the Arab and Muslim population attracted to fringe groups that engage in violence, led by al-Qaeda.

Washington Must Reverse Policy

If America's long, unsustainably expensive and essentially stalemated wars are doing little to eliminate the so-called « terrorist » threat, what's the alternative if Washington actually wants to eliminate terrorism?

The answer is to recognize that the history of America's misdeeds in the Middle East is the main reason for the existence of al-Qaeda. Instead of more wars, Washington must reverse its policies:

• Call off the wars. Pull the troops out. Withdraw the fleet and air bases from the region.

• Insist upon an equitable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and take measures to enhance Israel's compliance.

• Stop dominating and manipulating the countries of the Middle East to serve America's interests. Discontinue support for undemocratic governments and monarchies. Apologize for decades of manipulation and violence.

• Pay a huge compensation to the Iraqi people in particular. Invest heavily in eliminating poverty in the entire region and improving social services for the masses of people.

• Allow the Arab people, and the Iranians as well of course, to work out their political, social and cultural contradictions and preferences without interference. The United States is not the divine instrument chosen to redeem the world, and should stop behaving as though it were.

This will end jihadist terrorism. And it can all be paid for with the money Washington saves by ending its wars and subversion in the region.

There is another problem as well, however, more dangerous and widespread than the small-group terrorism of a handful of individuals with homemade weapons. That problem is state terrorism.

What else other than « state terrorism » can describe Washington's killer sanctions followed by the « shock and awe » bombing, invasion and occupation of Iraq against an essentially defenseless people? What else but state terrorism can we call U.S.-enabled Israel's horrendously disproportionate attack against the civilian population of Gaza, resulting in 1,400 Palestinian deaths and 14 Israeli deaths, followed by strangling sanctions?

At this stage, only the people of the United States have the power to force their government to stop interfering in the Middle East, thus ending the retaliatory threat of terrorism. And only the people have the power to end Washington's ongoing state terrorism against small developing countries in order to enhance its geopolitical fortunes.

So far, the U.S. government, whether controlled by one or the other of the two ruling parties, has hoodwinked most Americans into actively or passively supporting its aggressive wars. This is surprisingly easy to do, not least because most of us Americans suffer not at all due to our country's violent and criminal adventures abroad. It remains the task of those who see through the distortions and propaganda to speak up and take a public stand in opposition. To do less is to be indifferent to, or complicit with, a gross iniquity.

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