To what extent has the War on Terror helped secure the US and its Western allies from terrorism?

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have marked the beginning of the new grand strategy of the United States, which determined the principles of US involvement in the world for the 21st century. The attacks made the US realize that despite its military might it is not safe. In order to address the new threat posed by – predominantly – Islamic terrorism[1], the US and its allies waged the global 'War on Terrorism', and adopted a highly militarized, offensive approach to fighting terror. Since 2001, the 'war' has been waged on several fronts at huge costs in terms of funds and lives, yet its end still seems elusive in the near future. Therefore, an important question should be asked: has the 'war on terror' made us any safer from terrorism?

This essay seeks to answer this question. Basing itself on the literature, it will firstly examine what are the root causes of Islamic terrorism and assess whether the global 'war on terror' has addressed them properly, which the author believes is the most important criteria in assessing the effectiveness of US actions. The paper will then present the tactics adopted in the 'war on terror' and seek to assess whether they have contributed to a the greater safety of the US and its European allies. Finally, the paper will examine the effects of the 'war on terror' on the image of America among Muslim societies and especially the jihadist circles. It will argue that the highly offensive, militaristic approach of the US has failed to address the root causes of terrorism. The 'war on terror' has widened the perceived gap between Muslim societies and the West, fostering the global hostility towards the US. Finally, fighting the 'war on terror' the US has become a mirror image of its adversary, which limits the chances for establishing enduring peace. Consequently, there is little evidence that the 'war on terror' helped secure the West from terrorism.

Since the beginning of the 'war on terror' the number of terrorist attacks motivated by religion has risen significantly.[2] In the year 2005, more suicide attacks occurred than in any previous year, with Iraq constituting the most lethal country.[3] However, according to the official US data, in 2008 the number of attacks has fallen by 18% in comparison with 2007[4]. Moreover, the Middle East has remained the main battlefield of the 'war on terror', leaving the territories of the US and its European allies virtually free from terrorism.[5] Although such data might suggest that America is winning its 'war', it does not signify the absence of a terrorist threat in the West. If we assume that safety is measured by the possibility of an attack, statistics themselves are not a sufficient indicator, and a more in-depth analysis is required. First of all, such analysis has to include the assessment of the tactics adopted in the war on terror and whether they have properly addressed the root causes of terrorism. Addressing the root causes is crucial for the policy to be effective, as similarly to tuberculosis which cannot be cured with a cough syrup, the 'war on terror' will not bring successful result if it focuses on fighting the symptoms rather than the roots of the problem.

The literature on the root causes of terrorism has expanded in recent years, leaving the public exposed to numerous explanations one differing from another. According to economist Gary Becker, the higher income and education level, the lower likelihood of commitment to crime by individuals, therefore the root causes of terrorism can be found in poverty, illiteracy and social estrangement.[6] Although such explanation might seem compelling, other researches seem to contradict these assumptions. According to Abdullah Yousef Sahar Mohammad the current levels of literacy in the Middle East constitute a great improvement in comparison with the levels of twenty years ago, but such change

has not prevented the occurrence of terrorism from growing.[7] Similarly, Basel Saleh and Claude Berrebi have independently discovered that the majority of Palestinian suicide bombers come from relatively well-off families (in comparison with the rest of the society) and have a college education, which shows that Becker's argument is inadequate.[8]

At the same time, numerous researches have shown that there is a direct correlation between US support for oppressive and corrupted Middle Eastern regimes curtailing civil liberties and the increase in terrorism. According to Scott Atran[9], Anthony H. Cordesman[10] and Bhikhu Parekh[11] each of whom conducted an independent research, the lack of political freedoms, which denies the existence of moderate opposition, automatically pushes people into the hands of more radical movements. Moreover, the continuous bias of the US with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, coupled with the oppression, victimization and humiliation experienced by Palestinians, strengthens the general support for radical Islamist movements. According to Mohammad, the Israeli occupation of Arab territories and the consequent destruction of Arab pan-nationalistic visions, following the 1967 Arab defeat by Israeli forces, constitutes a direct reason for the dissatisfaction of Muslim societies with secularism (blamed for Arab defeats as a departure from the path of God) and the general turn towards religion-oriented political movements.[12] The following radicalization of these movements, and the emergence of global jihadism can be explained by the growing frustration among Muslims, some of whom see no other way for achieving their goals and terminating the humiliation of follow believers, but to engage in terrorist actions.

Terrorism therefore, seems to be a rational choice, and an alternative available to those seeking justice – perceivably the only form of expression available to the weak willing to restore their pride.[13] It is not to say that terrorism constitutes a legitimate form of political struggle, but rather to demonstrate that contrary to the general assumption, terrorists are not nihilistic individuals seeking to destroy Western civilization. According to Atran, who conducted numerous interviews with radical jihadists and their leaders, the commitment to God, identification with the principles of a group and the will to replace existing political regimes in the Middle East with a caliphate based on Salafi principles (literary reading of *hadiths* and the Koran; practicing Islam in the way corresponding with the first few generations of Muslims) constitute the main themes that push individuals to committing suicide attacks.[14] The unity of Ummah (community of the believers) and the victory over Jewish-American crusaders are considered to be the major goals of the Islamist movements.[15] So although religious motives might seem irrational, they do not preclude rational action for political or economic purposes.[16] As a spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Hamed Al-Betawi, told Atran: "[o]ur people do not own airplanes and tanks, only human bombs. Those who undertake martyrdom actions are not hopeless or poor, but are the best of our people, educated, successful. They are intelligent, advanced combat techniques for fighting enemy occupation." [17]

Thus the attacks of 9/11 have constituted a manifestation of dissatisfaction with American foreign policy and the sign that the US will not be safe as long as it supports the fragmentation of Arab nations in the Middle East. The Bush administration however seems to have neglected this message. It responded to the threat with a highly offensive militaristic approach accompanied by a propagandistic rhetoric, in which al Qaeda has been portrayed as a nihilistic movement motivated by the hatred towards American liberal values and democracy.[18] As President Bush stated directly after the attack: 'America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining'.[19] The perception that the ultimate goal of the attacks was to destroy the 'shining light' of American freedom has dominated the US approach to fighting terrorism and resulted in a strategy, which resembled the previously mentioned treatment of tuberculosis with a cough syrup.

According to the *US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* the antiterrorist struggle should involve the 'War of Ideas' and 'War on Poverty', with poverty and criminal ideology seen as the main generators of today's terrorist threat.[20] However, as already demonstrated, poverty does not constitute a direct cause of terrorism. With regards to criminal ideology, the survey conducted among the supporters of bin Laden and suicide terrorism indicate their simultaneous support for democracy, personal liberty and educational opportunity.[21] Thus, the US has misinterpreted the root causes of terrorism. Importantly however, in practice the 'war on poverty' and 'war of ideas' have taken a shape of a tough demonstration of military and political power in order to prevent any hostile forces from future attacks.[22] As Charles Krauthammer wrote in *The Washington Post*: [the US must create] 'the psychology of fear' in order to ensure 'deep respect for the American power'.[23] Consequently, the tactics employed in the 'war on

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terrorism' reflect the misperception of the roots of terrorism and the will to fight terror with terror.

The brightest manifestations of such approach have been the two wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) waged as a part of the global fight against terrorism. Targeting these two countries was aimed at denying terrorists territory to freely operate, and capturing the deciding membership of al Qaeda, in a line with the belief that the coalition forces need to kill enough terrorists to ensure the successive collapse of their networks.[24] With regards to Afghanistan, the coalition forces indeed managed to topple the radical Taliban regime, capture a number of terrorist leaders, such as Abu Zubaida in 2002[25], and forced al Qaeda leadership into hiding.[26] However, the Bush administration failed to predict the succeeding renewal of the Taliban insurgency in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In order to address this threat the coalition forces have ever since relied on local warlords as fighters against the insurgency, helping them to consolidate regional power.[27] Despite the plans to establish a strong lasting democracy in Afghanistan, the US has managed to put in place a highly unstable and corrupted government of Hamid Karzai, with a semblance of democracy, at the same time supporting local warlords.[28] The democratic reconstruction and nation-building efforts have so far failed, leaving the country in a permanent state of war. Did it make the West safer? Perhaps. The focus of the Taliban insurgency has ever since been to regain power in the country, which, in the short term, made the West less vulnerable to attacks.

Unlike the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq has made the security question more problematic. The stated goal of the administration was the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime, which was claimed to be in possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and to support al Qaeda. Despite the lack of UN approval, the US accompanied by the 'coalition of the willing' launched a highly unpopular, extremely lethal war, the reasons for which turned up to be based on a failed intelligence assessment.[29] The successive shift in the administration's justification for the war and making democracy promotion the main goal of the operation, left the global public disillusioned with the real motives of US actions: Iraq's oil, Israel's security and the pursuit for military bases in the region.[30] After seven years of war the goal of establishing democratic rule in place has not been met; similarly to Afghanistan, Iraq remains in a permanent state of war, the government is highly unstable and consists of individuals supportive of US actions, which makes the condition of Iraq's democracy highly suspicious. According to Christopher Hobson: 'Given the bad light the United States is viewed in by much of the Arab world, America cannot hope for regimes that are both fully democratic and pro-American to form'[31] because, following Shibley Telhami's remark: 'when you don't trust the messenger, you don't trust the message, even if it's a good one'.[32]

Unlike the Afghan war, Iraq has generated strong opposition to US actions around the world as well as among its traditional allies. According to the UN report, since the beginning of the war, al Qaeda recruitment has picked up in 30-40 countries.[33] Moreover, the in-depth study of the leading jihadist literature conducted by Thomas Hegghammer suggests that the Iraq war has been the single most pressing issue on the jihadist agenda in recent years, as it constitutes the brightest contemporary example of Muslim suffering.[34] Because of the location of Iraq in the heart of the Middle East, winning the war becomes the first priority of radical Islamic movements; its result will determine the future of the region, which will either fall in hands of evil Jewish –American crusaders, or become liberated from oppression.[35] Importantly, winning the Iraq war would constitute an important strategic victory for the jihadist side, as it would make the subsequent liberation of Palestine and Saudi Arabia tactically easier.[36] Such thinking, however, is not only limited to the radical wing of Islam. According to a Pew Research Centre survey of 2004, the war has generated a widespread support for terrorism among the majority of Muslims, including those living in rather moderate countries like Jordan or Morocco.[37] Moreover, Hegghammer found that the war has also resulted in a widespread hatred against the European countries stationing in Iraq, which are now considered to be legitimate targets of terrorism.[38] Therefore, the war in Iraq has not made the West any safer. To the contrary, it resulted in a greater support or tolerance for suicide bombings and widened the spectrum of potential enemy targets. Although Hegghammer notes that Iraq has become a major battlefield and the first priority of jihadists, which means that, at least temporarily, the occurrence of terrorism in the West is likely to be low or none,[39] it does not mean that the West is safe. Terrorist networks operate independently and are highly decentralized, which makes any predictions impossible.

Thus, the military operations, which claimed thousands of innocent lives, left the US far from winning the war on terror. But the failure to address the root causes of terrorism has been highly visible also in other tactics employed by

the US. As already demonstrated, one of the generators of terrorism has been the constant US support of undemocratic regimes, particularly in the Islamic world. The war on terror has made such support even more pronounced. Dictatorial regimes of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and especially Saudi Arabia among others, have become major supporters of the US in the 'war on terror', gaining substantial financial packages as a result.[40] Such cooperation generated widespread popular resentment towards the US, and consequently a greater support for terrorist networks.[41] However, the cooperation with undemocratic or partly democratic regimes has not been limited to the passive support in the war on terror. The US adopted a tactic of extraordinary rendition, which involves transferring alleged terrorists to different prisons in the world, famous for their disrespect towards human rights.[42] Although such actions are not permissible under the existing international human rights legal framework, are carried out in secret and result in the abusive treatment of prisoners, they have become a patterned tactic of the 'war on terror'.[43] As the former CIA agent stated: "If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria. If you want someone to disappear—never to see them again—you send them to Egypt."[44]

The use of torture against alleged terrorists has also been confirmed in American prisons. Detention centers in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Bagram in Afghanistan and Abu Ghraib in Iraq have become symbols of US ill-treatment of prisoners in the 'war on terror'. Detainees were subjected to *inter alia* sexual humiliation, extremes of heat and cold, drowning simulation, and were made to urinate and defecate on themselves.[45] Moreover, the US has been holding suspects in prisons without charges or due process refusing to disclose their names and number, as it could supposedly jeopardize American security.[46] In line with the Patriot Act, a statue enacted in 2001, the US government has had the authority to arrest and detain foreign individuals for extended periods of time, if there was a reasonable suspicion of their involvement in terrorist activities.[47] Importantly, it is unclear on what ground the decisions about detentions were made, as it became known that the majority of detainees have been innocent.[48]

The aggressive policy, however, has not been aimed at generating intelligence or preventing attacks. Scholars such as Parekh suggest that the main goal of the administration was to spread terror among the sympathizers of terrorist networks, and to demonstrate American power.[49] The instances of sexual abuse of prisoners or disrespectful treatment of the Koran by prison guards were also aimed at denying the dignity of prisoners and deepening their humiliation. Did it help in winning the war on terror? Certainly not. Photographs from Abu Ghraib have ever since their disclosure constituted visual manifestations of Muslim suffering, symbols of American evilness, and have been widely used by militant Islamic groups in propaganda films and texts.[50] US policy has generated anger among Muslims around the world and gave terrorists a green light to fight the West.

Interestingly, US tactics of spreading fear have not been limited to foreign nationals. In line with the Patriot Act provisions, US law enforcement bodies gained authority to conduct nationwide search warrants, wiretap (tied to certain person rather than telephone lines), eavesdrop on electronic mail or to detain US citizens as enemy combatants.[51] All these contributed to the significant loss of freedom within the US and according to Erwin Chemerinsky, there is no evidence that the impingement of liberty has made Americans any safer.[52] The only exception constitutes airport security measures; as the safety regulations became harsher and procedures more rigorous, it is reasonable to claim that flying has become safer.[53] However, it has to be noted that terrorist methods are limitless, when hijacking planes becomes difficult, car bombs can be used instead.[54] Fighting the effects of terror, and fighting them with terrorist means has proven to be unreasonable and ineffective. The today's terrorist networks, although short of many of their top leaders, are even more dispersed than before and even more difficult to target.[55] Moreover, the harsh counterterrorist strategy of the US, which resulted in huge war fatalities and torturing innocents, has widened the gap between the West and the Islamic world, deepened the hater towards the West and contributed to the legitimization of terrorism. Such legitimization, according to Hegghammer's research, led to the virtual disappearance of jihadist texts justifying terrorism. The question now is not: "'why jihad' but 'how jihad'".[56]

Summing up, this essay has argued that the US counterterrorism strategy has been largely ineffective and it did not make the West more secure from terrorism. The US efforts have not been directed at addressing the roots of terrorism, which include the US support for undemocratic regimes in the Islamic world and its constant bias towards Israel in the long running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To the contrary, the US has focused on fighting the symptoms of terror, which resulted in a highly offensive approach in fact fostering the hatred towards the US among Islamic

communities. The fatalities of the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the constant US support of oppressive regimes in the Middle East contributed to the higher tolerance and even legitimization of terrorism among Muslim societies. The recruitment for jihadist networks has grown significantly, which shows that the 'war on terror' is not being fought in a right way. Moreover, in a circle of mutual violence the US has become a mirror image of its adversary; the inhuman treatment of prisoners in the 'war on terror', most of whom have been already found innocent, shows that the ultimate goal of US actions was not to fight terrorism but to spread fear among Muslims. Such strategy however has not been effective. Instead of stopping the development of jihadist movements, it legitimized their pretensions. Although Iraq remains the main battlefield of the 'war on terror' and the occurrence of terrorism in the West has been limited, it does not mean that the West will not be targeted in the future. Especially given the fact that the US and its European allies constitute now legitimate targets of terrorism.

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