An End in Sight? The War on Terror and the Future of World Order

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/24/an-end-in-sight-the-war-on-terror-and-the-future-of-world-order/

ANDREW PHILLIPS, AUG 24 2011

Is an end to the war on terror in sight? Whether cast as a long war against violent jihadism or alternatively as a permanent state of exception contrived to legitimise Western imperialism, both proponents and critics have typically portrayed the war on terror as constituting an essentially indefinite global struggle. Given this consensus, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta's recent proclamation that the US has an imminent opportunity to inflict a 'strategic defeat' on Al Qaeda initially seems both hubristic and naïve.[1] Nevertheless, a sustained consideration of the war on terror reveals that Al Qaeda and their affiliates possessed strategic objectives that were (and are) intelligible; that they have largely failed to meet these objectives; and that without the tonic of political success the 'rebel wave' of jihadist terrorism that Al Qaeda spearheaded will likely follow its predecessors into the dustbin of history.[2] I do not intend to counsel either complacency or triumphalism in making this argument. Still less do I seek to downplay the immense importance of the 'war on terror' in conditioning the international order's evolution over the past decade. Instead, I maintain that jihadism's direct threat to international order has been exaggerated, while its larger strategic importance has been misread. As a circuit breaker aimed at reviving the fortunes of a declining movement, the jihadists' campaign to unite the *umma* in arms against an infidel-dominated world order has clearly failed. But as an important accelerant American hegemonic decline, the war on terror has critically hastened an ongoing power shift from West to East that will profoundly condition international order long after Al Qaeda has faded into oblivion.

Jihadism and Strategic Purpose

In apprehending the jihadist threat to international order, we must begin by acknowledging that Al Qaeda and its offshoots possess intelligible – if highly ambitious – strategic objectives. Consequently, we can assess their success or failure as a political movement by evaluating the extent to which these objectives have or have not been met. From its articulation in the writings of ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb in the immediate post-war era, jihadist extremism has been driven by two goals. The first of these has been the *umma's* spiritual regeneration, conceived as requiring the eradication of both heresies that have developed from within the Islamic tradition itself, as well as foreign (especially Western) cultural importations.[3] The second goal, practically inseparable from the first, has been the reassertion of the *umma's* temporal power. This is to be accomplished through the overthrow of incumbent 'apostate' regimes in Muslim-majority societies, the humbling of their infidel Western sponsors, and the *umma's* political unification within a revived caliphate.[4]

While initially confining themselves to subversive activities within their own countries, jihadists from the 1980s onwards increasingly conceptualised their struggle in global terms. Fawaz Gerges and others have noted the pivotal significance of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in catalysing this process, the conflict stimulating the emergence of a jihadist *Internationale* of émigré militants dedicated to the *umma's* global defence.[5] Notwithstanding these lofty aspirations, jihadist efforts in the 1990s to insinuate themselves into local conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya and elsewhere nevertheless generally failed to significantly expand the global jihadist base.[6] State repression in Algeria, Egypt and elsewhere similarly thwarted Islamic fundamentalist bids for power at a national level, regardless of whether they were pursued through democratic or terroristic means.[7]

By the mid to late 1990s, the jihadist movement was thus in imminent danger of losing its momentum, and it was in this context that Osama bin Laden initiated his global campaign against the 'Zionist-Crusader' alliance. Representing a radical fringe within the Islamic fundamentalist demimonde, bin Laden and his acolytes argued that a circuit breaker was urgently necessary to arrest jihadism's apparently terminal decline. More specifically, he argued that to defeat the 'near enemy' of apostate regimes oppressing the *umma*, it was necessary to first sever their connection to the their Western state sponsors (the 'far enemy'), most notably the United States.[8] Al Qaeda's ensuing global terror campaign aimed to realise this end by provoking America into a militarised confrontation with the Islamic world. The resulting conflict was expected to polarise the Islamic world and ultimately rouse the masses to overthrow the West's Quisling allies, thus paving the way for the caliphate's restoration.[9]

Initial Successes

The 9/11 attacks initially succeeded brilliantly in provoking America and its allies into exactly the kind of militarised interventions into Muslim countries that Al Qaeda's leadership had deemed essential to resuscitating jihadism's flagging fortunes. In provoking the United States into interventions in first Afghanistan and then Iraq, Al Qaeda accomplished three critical short-term objectives.

Firstly, in drawing America into two protracted and seemingly intractable expeditionary missions, Al Qaeda further aggravated America's existing problems of imperial overstretch. This achievement was consistent with Al Qaeda's broader commitment to a strategy of exhaustion aimed at draining Washington of the financial capacity and political will necessary to sustain its hegemonic position throughout the Greater Middle East.

Secondly, the 9/11 attacks and the interventions they elicited fanned anti-American sentiment throughout the Islamic world. As the United States' National Intelligence Estimate confirmed as early as 2006, US expeditionary operations served as a major catalyst for Muslim radicalization and jihadist recruitment in the years immediately following 9/11.[10] The indefinite presence of 'infidel' troops in Muslim-majority countries appeared for many Muslims to validate the jihadists' grand narrative of a besieged *umma* in need of defence, momentarily facilitating Al Qaeda's goal of 'opening the eyes' of the world's Muslims and thereby preparing them for a global uprising.

Thirdly, in the short term at least, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terror drove a significant wedge between the United States and its client autocracies in the Middle East and elsewhere. This was most evident in the instance of the Saudi-US bilateral relationship, which reached a nadir in the eighteen months spanning the 9/11 attacks through to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Like Britain before it, the United States has historically depended on partnerships with conservative autocracies to sustain its hegemony in the Persian Gulf. The Bush Administration's 'forward strategy of freedom' in the immediate post-9/11 period exacerbated differences in interests and values between Washington and its clients, thereby jeopardising the delicate web of patron-client relationships on which its regional dominance ultimately rested.[11]

Long-Term Failures

Notwithstanding their initial triumphs, a decade on from 9/11 the global jihadists remain no closer to realising their dream of a revived caliphate than they were in the late 1990s. Ten years into the war on terror, Al Qaeda core's capacity to mount attacks on the scale of 9/11 has been significantly – perhaps fatally – degraded. Bin Laden's death has denied the jihadist movement its 'instigator in chief', while America's relations with its Middle Eastern clients – while strained – have also proved surprisingly robust. Early indications also suggest that the jihadists have been unable to capitalise on the 'Arab Spring' in any meaningful way, confirming the movement's overall failure to capture either popular opinion or state power.[12]

A consideration of the reasons underlying jihadism's failure is illuminating, for it provides us with important insights concerning the international order's contemporary character and likely long-term evolution. At the most fundamental level, Al Qaeda's failures in the war on terror have stemmed from its underestimation of the United States as its principal adversary. Al Qaeda's leadership expected Operation Enduring Freedom to be a triumphant replay of the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s. Instead, the rapid toppling of the Taliban in late 2001 denied Al Qaeda its principal

safe haven, forcing its leadership to flee into Pakistan where they have thereafter been alternatively cosseted and confronted by competing elements of the Pakistani security establishment.[13]

Both the Taliban's ouster and the strengthening of global counter-terrorism cooperation under US sponsorship threw Al Qaeda's leadership onto the defensive, while also simultaneously radically constricting their operational reach. The US invasion of Iraq offered Al Qaeda a possibility of recovery, the invasion both distracting the US from consolidating its gains in Afghanistan while also opening up a new 'field of jihad' in the heart of the Arab world. Nevertheless, the post-9/11 constraints confronting Al Qaeda core compelled them to rely on Al Qaeda franchises such as Al Qaeda in the Mesopotamia (AQIM) to directly prosecute the struggle against the US and its allies. This expedient left the Al Qaeda leadership fundamentally dependent on unpredictable protégés such as Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi, whose atrocities against civilians in Iraq and Jordan catastrophically tarnished popular perceptions of jihadism throughout the Muslim world, robbing Al Qaeda of the mass base that remains crucial to realising its long-term goals.[14]

Al Qaeda's final error was to underestimate the unity of its enemies in rallying to defend a state-based international order against transnational subversion. The war on terror undeniably strained America's relations with its allies in its opening phases, and key allies such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have worked assiduously since that time to mitigate their dependence on the US as a security partner. This observation aside, national governments have nevertheless cooperated intensively to uphold the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. As a transnational predator openly threatening the Hobbesian protection bargain linking states and citizens, the global jihadist movement has been successfully stigmatised as a threat to state authority everywhere, regardless of governments' ideological complexions.[15] This lowest common denominator consensus has been sufficient to bind governments together in shared opposition to jihadist violence, the commitment to preserving a state-based international order overriding the differences in interests and values that Al Qaeda had hoped to aggravate and exploit at the outset of its campaign.

The War on Terror is Ending – And China Won

The American sports-caster Yogi Berra once wryly observed, 'Prediction is difficult – especially about the future', and this admonition would seem particularly apposite in light of the war on terror's crooked course thus far. Nevertheless, Al Qaeda's failure to achieve its principal strategic goals is undeniable, while jihadism's long-term viability as a violent transnational social movement remains questionable. AQIM's persistence in Iraq attests to the tenacity of jihadist radicals, while the spectre of homegrown radicalization of Muslim diasporas in Western Europe and beyond remains a matter of serious concern. Al-Shabbab's expanding footprint in East Africa, continuing instability in a nuclear-armed Pakistan and the possible dividends the Islamic Libyan Fighting Group and others might yield from Gaddafi's pending fall also counsel caution in writing premature epitaphs for jihadism. These caveats aside, mere survival cannot be equated with success. The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the global jihadists have proved just as susceptible to basic errors of strategy – including unrealistic end goals, an underestimation of their adversaries' unity and resolve, and the alienation of much-needed allies through ill-discipline and excess – as their state-based opponents. Unlike its state-based opponents, however, jihadism as a social movement cannot indefinitely endure without political success. Bin Laden intuitively understood this when he first contrived the strategic circuit breaker of 9/11 to arrest jihadism's decline. A decade on, jihadists remain hostage to the same imperatives, but appear no closer to obtaining their key objectives.

History is replete with insurgent movements that ended in failure, and the evidence thus far suggests that the jihadist challenge to global order will be one of them.[16] But the defeat of Al Qaeda should not detract from the war on terror's immense indirect significance as an accelerant of American hegemonic decline and the ongoing global power shift from the North Atlantic to Asia. For while America remains globally preponderant, Al Qaeda and its affiliates have succeeded in embroiling the United States in two immensely costly wars that have strained its alliances, diminished its financial reserves and corroded its political will to project power internationally. In Western Europe, meanwhile, the war on terror has significantly sharpened tensions between an increasingly post-Christian majority and its Muslim communities, stoking diaspora radicalisation and nativist right-wing extremism in the process. The result has been to amplify introspective tendencies on both sides of the Atlantic, reinforcing a focus on internal

challenges already mandated by the ongoing financial crisis.

America is now well advanced in extricating itself from Iraq and Afghanistan, and is in any case endowed with a singular capacity for regeneration that will mitigate the damage to its power and prestige that the war on terror has inflicted over the longer term. Equally, the challenges of maintaining societal cohesion that Western European countries face – while formidable – remain eminently surmountable. But these reassurances cannot mask the reality that the international order will in future increasingly reflect the interests and values of Asia's rising giants. Nor can it reverse the fact the war on terror has for a decade diverted Western resources and attention in ways that have significantly hastened the East-West power transition. This power shift was inevitable in the long run. But its acceleration has brought forward the moment at which the Western democracies will need to accept an autocratic China as an equal partner in managing the global order, an order that has until recently borne the distinctive imprint of Western interests, and that has sought however imperfectly to institutionalise a broadly liberal vision of the good. Ultimately, it will be the this task of reconciling liberal values with the need to accommodate a rising autocratic superpower – rather than the lesser though still important task of subduing the bitter-enders of a discredited cult – that will form the defining challenge of the twenty-first century.

Dr Andrew Phillips *(@APhillipsIntRel) is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Strategy at the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. He is most recently the author of War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and has articles published or forthcoming in European Journal of International Relations, Review of International Studies, Australian Journal of International Affairs, National Identities and Security Challenges.*

[1] US 'within reach of strategic defeat of Al Qaeda', BBC News, 9 July 2011, available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-14092052 Accessed 24 August 2011.

[2] Rapoport, D.P. 2001. The Fourth Wave: September 11 and the History of Terrorism. *Current History* 100 (650):419-424.

[3] Phillips, Andrew. 2009. How al Qaeda lost Iraq. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 63 (1), p. 67.

[4]See generally Mendelsohn, Barak. 2005. Sovereignty Under Attack: The International Society Meets the Al Qaeda Network. *Review of International Studies* 31 (1):45-68.

[5] See generally Gerges, Fawaz A. 2005. *The Far Enemy – Why the Jihad Went Global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kepel, Gilles. 2006. *Jihad – The Trail of Political Islam*. 4th ed. London: I.B. Taurus.

[6] See for example Sageman, Marc. 2004. *Understanding Terror Networks*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 59-60.

[7] Kepel, Gilles. 2003. The Origins and Development of the Jihadist Movement: From Anti-Communism to Terrorism. *Asian Affairs* XXXIV (II), pp. 100-103.

[8] Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p. 1.

[9] Doran, Michael Scott. 2002. Somebody Else's Civil War. *Foreign Affairs* 81 (1), p. 23.

[10] Declassified Key Judgements of the National Intelligence Esimate "Trends in Global Terrorism" dated April 2006, available at http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf Accessed 24 August 2011.

[11] For a useful analysis of the instability that the war on terror has fomented in Saudi Arabia, see generally Riedel, Bruce, and Bilal Y. Saab. 2008. Al Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia. *The Washington Quarterly* 31 (2):33-46.

[12] The overall impact of the unfolding 'Arab Spring' on the global jihadist movement is however admittedly difficult to determine at this time. For an even-handed assessment of the challenges and opportunities the 'Arab Spring' presents for Al Qaeda, see generally Zarate, Juan C., and David A. Gordon. 2011. The Battle for Reform with Al-Qaeda. *The Washington Quarterly* 34 (3):103-122.

[13] On the internal divisions that erupted within the jihadist movement following the 9/11 attacks and Al Qaeda's subsequent expulsion from Afghanistan, see generally Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, chapter five ('Aftermath: The War Within').

[14] See generally Fishman, Brian. 2006. After Zarqawi: The dilemmas and future of Al Qaeda in Iraq. *The Washington Quarterly* 29 (4):19-32; Phillips, 'How Al Qaeda Lost Iraq'

[15] On states' historic will and capacity to suppress violent transnational actors, see generally Lowenheim, Oded. 2007. *Predators and parasites: persistent agents of transnational harm and great power authority* . Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Within the more specific context of the war on terror, see Lowenheim, Oded, and Brent J. Steele. 2010. Institutions of Violence, Great Power Authority, and the War on Terror. *International Political Science Review* 31 (1):23-39; and Mendelsohn, Barak. 2009. *Combating jihadism: American hegemony and interstate cooperation in the War on Terrorism*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

[16] For a prescient analysis of the dynamics driving Al Qaeda's decline, see generally Cronin, Audrey Kurth. 2006. How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups. *International Security* 31 (1):7-48.