

It Is a Civil War Within Islam: Not Global Terrorism

Written by Dick Krickus

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DICK KRICKUS, JUN 13 2012

In an attempt to justify the invasion of Iraq, the administration of George W. Bush exaggerated the military capacity of the 9/11 jihadists that were response for the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Champions of the pre-emptive strike among neo-conservatives likened Al-Qaeda to the dictatorships responsible for the Second World War. In sum the jihadists were the principal enemy of the United States in the “global war on terrorism.” In a campaign to justify and unjustified war in Iraq then, one of the fundamental principles of warfare was violated *-Know thine enemy*.

Al-Qaeda and affiliated jihadist movements have committed heinous terrorist acts in many areas of the world, and in the process have killed thousands of people. In that respect, they represent a global threat, but their capacity to achieve a 21st century Caliphate is beyond their reach. It is an absurdity to compare them with 20th century totalitarian movements. Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin possessed massive military war machines responsible for the death of tens of millions of people and physical destruction of seismic proportions. Vast numbers of heavily armed general purpose forces were required to crush fascism and to meet the threat of Soviet communism. A much smaller force is required to neutralize the jihadists whose principal weapon is terrorism. To confront them with a larger force only plays into their hands.

A more appropriate description of the turmoil roiling within Islam today is “civil war.” The world witnessed something similar in August 1914. Then European civilization was stricken by a monumental eruption when the forces of the old and new order clashed within societies fractured by capitalism, industrialization, science, secularism, and urbanization. In this century, much the same thing is happening within the Islamic Umma as over one billion people struggle to strike a balance between traditional, religious-bound impulses and the dynamics of a modern secularized world.

While the fanciful campaign to create a 21st century Caliphate through brutal acts of terrorism is one manifestation of the Islamic Civil War, a second component is manifested in cultural, economic, political, and religious dislocations collectively known as the “Arab Spring.” At this point, the course of the popular uprisings is difficult to plot, even with Quaddafi’s fall in Libya, but it prompts several important observations:

- The potential for protracted and widespread violence is exceedingly high, and the repercussions for the international community are monumental. To cite just one example, a major disruption in the flow of oil from the Arab-Persian Gulf region would devastate a global economy still recovering from the greatest recession since the Great Depression.
- Not all areas of the Greater Middle East are of the same strategic value, and the United States must be selective in projecting its power in this vast area of the world.
- Washington can no longer rely on autocrats as instruments of stability since the strategic environment that has sustained them is disintegrating.
- The Arab Spring’s future is uncertain, but unlike their former rulers, the newly empowered masses will oppose policies long favored by the United States. Among other things, the Arab street will demand that Washington adopt a

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more even-handed approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; that U.S. bases be reduced in size or shutdown altogether; and that American leaders stop preaching the glories of democracy while supporting dictators.[1]

As a consequence of these developments, Washington cannot unilaterally deal with the mayhem that the Islamic civil war has unleashed, and this reality is the basis for what some commentators have called the “Obama Doctrine.” It rests on the truism that the United States must enlist allies in multilateral responses to jihadist threats. It also means collaborating with countries that may not share our values but are pursuing common security interests.

Clearly, when the violence spills over into domestic society, we must respond with the appropriate force. But it is a fantasy to think that even the world’s premier military power can decide the outcome of the Islamic civil war. At best, events can be influenced at the margins. At times, the most prudent policy may be to do nothing at all. Had the U.S. fought the “right war” in Afghanistan, rather than the “wrong one” in Iraq, Afghanistan today might not be a democracy, but the odds are good that it would be free of the Taliban, though still perhaps a troubled society.

Unlike the 2010 elections, foreign policy concerns will have a bearing on the outcome of the 2012 races as an expanding number of voters see a link between foreign intervention and their own economic plight. Opposition to the Afghan war includes Americans on the left and right, and members of Congress are receiving mail from constituents demanding justification for spending \$1 million annually to keep an American soldier on the Afghan battlefield when their state reduces health care benefits, emasculates public unions, and raises taxes. Even prominent conservatives now question the rationale for maintaining a massive defense budget when the country faces a \$14 trillion debt burden. According to a spokesman for Senator Tom Colburn, there are ideological reasons for conservatives to curb defense outlays that exceed U.S. needs. “By subsidizing our allies’ defense budgets, American taxpayers are essentially subsidizing France’s 35-hour working week and Western European socialism.”[2] Meanwhile, his liberal opponents, including President Obama, are calling for nation-building “at home.”

Since there will be no quick turn-around of the sagging economy, the American military must live with what has been unthinkable: significant reductions in the defense budget. Toward this end, U.S. military officials have doubled the size of the hit that the Department of Defense must take in most recent assessments. As of late July 2011, it was assumed that the defense budget would be reduced by \$800 billion over the next 12 years. Several months prior to that time, the estimate was half that figure. At the same time, and in contrast to the past, the companion notion that the United States must reduce its presence abroad no longer faces staunch opposition from the Republican Party (GOP) and its adherents. For example, in 2004, most Americans identified as “conservative Republicans” said it was “best to be active in world affairs,” but 7 years later that majority slipped to 39 percent.

At the same time, foreign policy and military planners cannot be unmindful of serious fissures in American society that deny political leaders a nation united around a common narrative. The social compact that emerged from the New Deal and provided the vast majority of Americans with a stake in our democratic polity and free market economy is in peril. A unified America defeated fascism during World War II and subverted European communism during the Cold War. Today, a significant segment of American citizens are questioning the loyalty of their fellow Americans, while disunity at home and dramatic changes abroad represent huge barriers that American leaders must negotiate if they are to forge a common foreign policy agenda.

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Dick Krickus is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Mary Washington and has held the Oppenheimer Chair for Warfighting Strategy at the U.S. Marine Corps University. The above is abstracted from his *‘The Afghanistan Question and the Reset in U.S.-Russian Relations’*. It was published by the U.S. Army War College and can be downloaded free of charge.

[1] For an early assessment of the Arab Spring, see the series of articles published under the rubric “The New Arab Revolt,” in the May/June 2011 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

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[2] Carrie Budoff-Brown, “Will New War Nix Big Defense Cuts?” *Politico*, March 28, 2011.