

Losing the 'war on terror'



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No effort against terrorism can work when it refuses to understand the root causes, especially when it actually encourages more widespread and endless violence

WAR, terrorism, religion, governance and business are human activities that become more complicated and troublesome when they mix.

It is bad enough when nations have to go to war. That makes governance, diplomacy and business more difficult without solving anything.

But when the business makes gains from war, then war, terrorism and the “war on terrorism” converge into an industry. That happened when George W. Bush and his US oil industry friends invaded Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which had the fifth-largest oil reserves in the world.

Next was Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, with the largest oil reserves in all of Africa. “Regime change” happened again, this time with the Obama presidency that let France do the initial waves of bombing.

There was a new administration in the White House, but regime change was already in the air. Next was Bashar al-Assad’s Syria.

There were other interests at play, of course. Saddam, Muammar and Bashar have all been steadfast adversaries of a Zionist Israel in their neighbourhood, as it was of them.

Each strong leader was besieged and then overthrown, with Bashar still standing if also weakening. There was once heady talk of a hopeful “Arab Spring” when tyrants were ousted, but that hope soon disappeared as the spring skipped summer and turned into a prolonged winter.

Still, actions have consequences and those consequences have effects in a chain of instability, insecurity and violence.

With Saddam and his Ba’ath party organisation suddenly removed, criminal and other base elements swelled and multiplied to fill the vacuum. Among them was the violent Jordanian petty criminal Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had “trained” in Afghanistan where he met Osama bin Laden.

In late 2002 George W. Bush wanted to topple Saddam and sought to connect him with terrorism as justification. The CIA was tasked to produce evidence for a link with Abu Musab, but could not find any.

Then the justification switched to “weapons of mass destruction” that Saddam was accused of possessing. Although no evidence could be found of that either, the decision to invade Iraq and remove Saddam had been made.

Abu Musab founded the terrorist group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad ("Monotheism and Jihad Organisation") and moved to Iraq where it flourished in the absence of Saddam.

Some 19 months after the March 2003 US invasion, Abu Musab swore allegiance to Osama and changed his group's name to Tan'im Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, or "al-Qaeda in Iraq."

After Abu Musab's brutal attacks against other Muslims, children and civilian bystanders, al-Qaeda and partner al-Nusra Front disowned his group. That left him unfazed as he went independent.

After perishing in a bombing raid in 2006, his Salafi-Wahhabi group morphed further and changed its name again, until his successor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made it ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah (Da'ish, or Islamic State).

Less than one year ago Da'ish came into world renown as the most ambitious and brutal of all terrorist groups. Since its August 2014 peak, however, its fortunes have ebbed and flowed.

In Iraq it kept or gained ground in Mosul, Baiji and Rutba but lost in Ramadi. In Syria it has retained its base in Raqqa while holding Hasaka, Mahin and villages east of Aleppo but lost in Tal Abyad.

Much of its strength remains undiminished, despite the onslaught by Western and Iraqi forces in Iraq and Iranian and Russian forces in Syria, with a smattering of Lebanese fighters in both. As long as Da'ish survives, it will generate propaganda about its supposed invincibility.

How then to disrupt, disable and destroy such a movement? The US as the world's greatest military power is in the spotlight for its readiness to engage in such conflicts, but its involvement has not always been productive.

The US conservative position is supposedly "tough on terrorism" but proved to be of little utility. Its rigid adherence to tackling the symptoms of terrorism without even recognising its foundations tends to be counter-productive.

The neo-conservative approach is even worse. It prefers its own narrative without letting the facts get in the way – when necessary, it would fabricate evidence to justify its own misperceptions.

The liberal position is more realistic but also more vulnerable to conservative criticism. It is that the military option alone cannot solve the problem, there are different degrees of military involvement, and ethnic or religious groups should not be targeted for the crimes of some of their stablemates.

The Obama presidency's position goes a little further than the stock liberal stand. It is wary of rushing into every conflict, it distinguishes between wars of necessity and wars of choice, and it may permit diplomacy a role before resorting to a military option.

The approach can be cerebral, requiring patience and a political reading of a particular situation. Set against it is the ultra-extremism of Da'ish, whose atrocities test public patience and provoke rash and simplistic responses.

Enter Donald Trump as a presidential aspirant in election season. His brand of crude populism easily fires the imagination and drives the emotions of his public.

As a successful business magnate and purportedly self-made billionaire, Trump along with his supporters make the mistake of assuming that business success automatically translates into political success.

The corporate boardroom is a most undemocratic place where the top shareholder decides. The political arena of a democracy is very different, particularly with a US presidency seriously constrained by Congress.

Trump's "tough on terrorism" image has led to, among other things, his pledge to ban all Muslims from entering the US. This follows other outrageous remarks against women and Latinos, and may not be his last.

Censured by fellow Republicans, Trump has threatened to run as an independent, confident that it would leave the Republican Party rudderless. He is a neo-con on steroids, a redneck in a suit, a 21st-century Archie Bunker at the bully pulpit.

Predictably, he has seized the terrorist bugbear by the horns and milking it for all its political worth. But in the process, he has shown he may have more in common with "the other" than he may like.

Like Abu Musab (and Abu Bakr), Trump is an ultra-conservative leading supporters down an extremist path with simplistic tirades and actions that can backfire. They are brand-conscious yet ready to break ranks with mentors to go their own way.

Like Trump, Abu Bakr (and Abu Musab) is a strong, ambitious and narcissistic leader with grand designs stirring his public with discriminatory proclamations and sweeping generalisations against his adversaries. The scale of the support they have attracted has been surprising and disturbing for many.

Trump has typically attacked the liberal position of weighing all options before risking World War III or worse. But ultimately, he is the best presidential candidate that the worst radical extremist can hope for.

By lumping all Muslims together and defining them as terrorists, actual or potential, he is giving more than a billion people in the world a common cause against him and his country.

And by allowing Da'ish to define his concerns, he is making the group the effective leader of all Muslims in the world – the very claim and objective of Da'ish.

They work well together and energise and deserve each other – but nobody else does.

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