The Next Phase of the War on Terror: The Middle East Perspective

Ephraim Kam

Afghanistan: The Morning After

In retrospect, the American military operation in Afghanistan appears to have been the easier and swifter part of the War on Terror. Preliminary delays and doubts notwithstanding, the Taliban regime collapsed relatively quickly and Al-Qa'ida's organization in Afghanistan is in the process of disintegration. US losses were limited, and so far the US has avoided entanglements on the ground or a loss of control over the situation. At the same time, the campaign has not posed a political challenge to the Bush Administration, and may ultimately lead to a moderate, stable leadership taking the reins in Afghanistan. Furthermore, despite early apprehensions (particularly concerning Pakistan), sympathy towards Bin Laden has not translated, thus far, into mass uprisings in the various Muslim states. The initial agitation in the streets faded within a few days, and no large scale terrorist acts have been perpetrated against American targets.

Now begins the more difficult and complex phase of the War on Terror. Likely to last several years and to extend across dozens of countries, it will require patience and diligence. Moreover, unlike the Afghani campaign, it is unlikely to take place in a series of swift, definitive moves. If there are to be successes, these will likely take place far from the public eye, and will accumulate into real

> **Now begins the more difficult and complex phase of the War on Terror.**

achievements only over a long period of time. Moreover, it is likely to give rise to a number of controversial issues, any of which could pose difficulties for the US.

So far the Bush Administration appears not to have taken any decisions concerning the operational methods it will adopt in the next stage of the War on Terror, nor has it determined their order of priority. With that, the US has taken certain measures to improve its domestic security, including steps intended to improve early-warning capabilities, to improve security, and to prevent acts

of terror. In addition, the Bush Administration is considering (and in some cases, has already implemented) a series of further moves. These steps, some of which are still being debated within the administration, can be summarized as follows:

1. *Eradicating Al-Qa'ida*. Al-Qa'ida and its related organizations have established networks and cells in some 45 different states, both in the Arab/ Islamic world, and in the West. To eliminate these networks, a wide range of measures will need to be taken, in the judicial, law-enforcement, diplomatic, and financial realms. In addition, further military operations may be deemed necessary, in order to eradicate surviving Al-Qa'ida strongholds. The implementation of such measures will require close cooperation with those states hosting these networks. While the US seems determined to pursue this, it is likely to encounter complex problems along the way. Such problems can already be seen clearly in US attempts to apply measures to cut off Al-Qa'ida's sources of funding: many states will likely view American demands as untoward interference in their domestic affairs.

2. *Destroying other terrorist networks*. The US will be seeking to dismantle the infrastructure of a

number of other international terrorist organizations, a goal that will include preventing third-party states from providing support to such organizations. This goal is derived from US perceptions that terrorist organizations form an integrated network that threatens international security and stability, and that the present opportunity to defeat them must be exploited fully. It may reasonably be assumed that priority will go to dealing with those terrorist organizations that threaten the US and its interests, whether directly or otherwise. However, its approach toward organizations that do not threaten such interests remain difficult to gauge: will the US deem it necessary to target them as well? In this context, it is worth noting that the Bush administration has set its sights on Hizballah, because of that organization's complicity in attacks against US targets, its wide-ranging activities in other states, its links to Iran, and its attacks on Israel.

In principle, the Bush Administration has already decided to act in this regard, and has already identified a number of organizations that should be addressed. It has not, however, decided what the scope of these actions will be – *vis-à-vis* both the organizations themselves, and the states hosting them. A considerable difficulty also emerges concerning the manner in which these organizations are to be fought: some of the organizations in question are considered entirely legitimate movements of national liberation by

their host states. As such, the host states are likely to oppose US attempts to target them, and could drag their feet in the face of US pressures to act. Moreover, the US has yet to define exactly what it will do if the states hosting these organizations decline to act on their own.

Moreover, there is a prevailing expectation in the US that those states party to the coalition against terrorism will undertake structural reforms intended to change the conditions that

> **There is an expectation in the US that states party to the coalition against terrorism will undertake internal reforms intended to discourage terrorism.**

first encouraged terrorist cells to emerge. These include long-term social, educational, religious and cultural reforms (including changes to educational curricula and the like), particularly in Muslim and Arab states. The US is still considering what approach it should take in this regard; no definitive, operational ideas have yet been expressed. Even so, the very idea of imposing a long-term domestic agenda on third-party states could well engender severe resistance, inasmuch as the reforms envisioned could affect their very existence and stability.

3. *Linking the War on Terror to other US foreign policy goals.* The Bush administration would like to create linkages between the War on Terror and other threats to American security and/or international stability. This third aspect of US thinking is likely to be the most problematic of all, and the Bush Administration has not decided whether and how to pursue it.

In particular, the US would like to address threats emanating from the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and their potential acquisition by radical regimes and/or organizations. The main offenders in this context are Iraq, and to a lesser extent, Iran. President Bush has already expressed a possible linkage between terror and WMDs by declaring that Saddam Hussein would do well to fear a US response if Iraq continues to reject the return of non-conventional weapons inspectors into its territory. While the US has yet to commit to the use of military force outside of Afghanistan, it has also rather pointedly refrained from negating such a possibility, particularly in the Iraqi context.

The War on Terror and the Middle East

The most significant obstacle to the measures that the US would like to adopt in its War on Terror is the absence of solid coalition support. In the eyes of the Bush Administration, the existence of such a coalition – and especially, the participation of Muslim states within it – is vital. The US does not want to alienate the Muslim world

further, and Islamic resentment of the US is a matter of acute American concern. Beyond this, the majority of anti-terrorist measures presently being considered by the US simply cannot be implemented effectively without substantial international cooperation. To that end, the administration has designated a number of tasks to various states, which it would like to see joining the coalition. These include the eradication of terrorist networks, either by cutting off their funding or through judicial and law-enforcement measures, and the fostering of intelligence cooperation. In addition, the US wishes to gain the promise of military assistance – whether directly or through the provision of logistical support – should it decide to undertake additional military actions.

The coalition's greatest problem is its weakness, particularly among the Muslim and Arab states party to it. While the use of the term 'coalition' connotes the US-led campaign against Iraq in 1991, the differences between the Gulf War coalition and the present one are substantial. First, most Arab states do not share American approaches to terrorism. Second, international conditions have changed dramatically since 1991. These changes can be enumerated as follows:
• *Arab problems vs. American ones.* In the Gulf War, there was an essential Arab interest that was served by cooperation with the US. Most Arab states viewed the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait primarily as an inter-Arab problem. With that, they also recognized that the challenge

presented by Saddam could not be responded to without US intervention. By contrast, these states perceive the question of terrorism as an *American* problem. As such, other considerations limit the willingness of Arab states to take part.
• *Lack of compelling interests.* In the Gulf War, many Arab states actively cooperated with the US because their leaders feared further Iraqi aggression. Such fears have largely (if not entirely) subsided: having been chastened by

> The most significant obstacle to the measures that the US would like to adopt is the absence of solid coalition support.

the US, Iraq remains weak. Moreover, over the last three years the Arab world has shown willingness to gradually reaccept Iraq back into the fold.
• *Inter-Arab perceptions.* Arab perceptions regarding the Gulf War were entirely different from those regarding the War on Terror. Saddam, having crossed a red line by invading and occupying Kuwait, created a situation in which the "good guys" and the "bad guys" were drawn in clear relief. Therefore, while there were some expressions of identification with the Iraqi leader in

the Arab world, the states that opted into the anti-Iraqi coalition did not face any severe internal opposition. This time, the situation is somewhat different: despite American efforts to avoid portraying the War on Terror as a clash between East and West, this is in fact exactly how it is perceived by a considerable number of Arabs. Expressions of popular for Bin Laden in Muslim and Arab countries reflect this – while such expressions may not signify sympathy for Bin Laden personally, he has come to symbolize resistance to the evils of US hegemony.
• *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* The violence that has raged between Israelis and Palestinians since September 2000 cannot be ignored in the present context. The Arab states would like to foster a linkage between the deadlock in the peace process and the War on Terror, since American support of Israel is a component part of anti-US hostility. Moreover, many states in the region would like their support for US demands regarding terrorism to be repaid through greater American action *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian issue. To that end, many Arab states would like to see increased American pressure on Israel, and greater efforts toward a political settlement acceptable to the Palestinians.

Given this backdrop, Arab attitudes to US-led anti-terrorism efforts hinge on two major considerations. On the one hand, most Arab regimes understand that the US has no choice but to react to such a severe attack, even if some have demanded proof linking the

targets of American retribution to Al-Qa'ida and/or Bin Laden. Furthermore, many regimes recognize that radical Islamic movements threaten them as well, and hence a common interest exists for fighting terrorism. Finally, the role of US pressure in getting some states to cooperate (and their fear of sanctions, should they fail to do so) should not be ignored.

On the other hand, the willingness to actively fight terrorism is sharply circumscribed by the fact that cooperating with the US could arouse public discontent against many of the existing regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. This is especially the case when the terrorist organizations in question enjoy strong popular support. Showing excessive support of US moves in this regard could thus create severe internal problems for many Muslim and Arab regimes. The possibility that sympathy for Bin Laden could quickly turn into popular sentiment against national leaderships (and thereby threaten domestic stability) is a major concern among Arab and Muslim leaderships. Many Arab and Muslim states could accept the downfall of the Taliban (who were in any case pariahs, even within the Arab world), given their clear connection to Al-Qa'ida and the September 11 attacks. Beyond this point, however, these states harbor distinct reservations regarding American military actions.

These opposing considerations form the basis of Arab and Muslim states' practical responses to American demands for fighting terrorism. On the declarative level, these regimes have supported publicly the need to fight terrorism. However, some of them do not accept US definitions of what constitutes terrorism, and have rejected any connection between it and Islam. While they did nothing to sabotage the American campaign in Afghanistan, they also refrained from providing any practical assistance to it.

> **The role of US pressure in getting some states to cooperate (and their fear of sanctions, should they fail to do so) should not be ignored.**

With that, some Arab countries have provided the US with information on Al-Qa'ida activity within their borders, and some of them have even arrested Al-Qa'ida operatives. Among these are states that have not previously cooperated with the US: the Sudan, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. It may be assumed that some of these states might also be prepared to act against other terrorist organizations inside their borders. However, such actions will be conditioned on two factors: first, that doing so serves their own interests; and second, that the US not use the War on Terror as mechanism by which to interfere in their internal affairs.

To that end, different states in the Arab world have displayed varying degrees of participation in the coalition against terror. Jordan, for example, has shown more willingness than other Arab states to support American efforts (including the sending of a peacekeeping force to Afghanistan, and cooperating with US intelligence efforts). Jordan's approach is likely influenced by its perception of Al-Qa'ida as a threat to its internal security, given its involvement in a plot to assassinate King Abdullah, and to commit attacks against American targets in Jordan. Similarly, Egypt (which has a long history of fighting radical Islamic challenges to its stability), has arrested operatives belonging to these organizations.

By contrast, the assistance that Saudi Arabia is prepared to extend the US is much more modest in scope. The Saudi regime is increasingly concerned with internal Islamic opposition, which has grown over the last decade, and it has responded in part by adopting an anti-American orientation. Rather than trying to repress Islamic elements, the Saudis prefer compromise. A concerted anti-terrorist action would likely undermine the fragile balance that the regime wants to build with the opposition. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has not increased its efforts in helping the US to investigate terrorist links to Bin Laden, and money apparently

continues to flow from Saudi Arabia to his bank accounts.

Syria poses the Bush administration with a different problem. There is at present no significant Islamic opposition to the Syrian regime. However, Syria is sheltering a number of Palestinian terrorist organizations, including the Islamic Jihad and the military wing of the Hamas. It also provides significant support to Hizballah in Lebanon. At first, Syrian leaders claimed that these organizations were legitimate movements of national resistance, and hence it would take no action against them. However, American pressure has brought about a change in this position, as it has become clear to the Syrians that they might themselves become a target in the next stage of American anti-terror operations. It has since been reported that Syria has cooperated with the Bush Administration in investigating Al-Qa'ida activity. It has also stated that it will consider ways of clamping down on organizations like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah, including closing their offices and stopping their activities. To that end, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk a-Sharaa has hinted that there may be some need to lower the profile of such groups.

Iraq and Iran: Possible Targets?

Iraq poses the most complex problem regarding the next stage of American anti-terrorist activity. There is no doubt that the Bush Administration would like to use the post-September 11 situation to renew its attempts at containing Iraqi efforts toward acquiring WMDs, and even to bring about the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. In this regard, the administration has signaled that a military move against Iraq is no longer a question of 'if' – rather, it is now merely a question of 'when' and 'how.'

The main problem is that so far no Arab or European state (including

> The administration has signaled that a military move against Iraq is no longer a question of 'if' – rather, it is now merely a question of 'when' and 'how'.

Russia), has expressed support for a US-led move against Iraq. Even Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both which have an interest in weakening Iraq, and which actively supported the war in 1991, have expressed reservations, apparently fearing that agitation in Iraq would spill over onto them as well. Yet without support from states adjacent to Iraq, the US will lack both the infrastructure and the logistical assistance necessary for an eventual extended military action. Moreover, were the US to decide to 'go it alone,' the resulting Arab/Muslim backlash would likely make it more difficult to

garner support for other anti-terrorist goals. In addition, the US will need international support if it is to activate the United Nations and renew the sanctions on Iraq.

Should a military action against Iraq be undertaken, the real question will be regarding its goals. If the US decides to seek the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, it is unlikely to succeed. Such an operation could take a number of different forms: the US could invade Iraq outright; it could launch an aerial offensive intended to encourage an internal change of power; or it could attempt to cobble together the various existing anti-regime opposition forces, along the lines of US actions in Afghanistan.

It is possible that certain Arab and Muslim regimes would acquiesce to an American-led military action against Saddam, but this would likely be conditional upon the operation in question being completed quickly. This could well be the rub: the possibility of bringing down the regime in a stroke seems low. While aerial attacks could do great harm to Iraq – and particularly to its military – these are unlikely to bring down the regime. Saddam's regime is a good deal more resilient than was the Taliban, and fostering an opposition in Iraq along the lines of the Northern Alliance – one which could move into Baghdad and take up the reins of power – is unlikely to be easy.

Time, in other words, would be of the essence: in order to prepare the groundwork for an opposition-led

revolution, a prolonged aerial bombardment of Iraqi military and government targets would need to take place. However, as noted above, time is exactly what plays against the US. Given the level of opposition that such a military campaign would likely arouse, it is unlikely that the US would have enough time to do the job. Were this to prove correct, the US could find itself facing the worst of all possible outcomes: having to cut short its operation to bring down the regime before its objectives were met. Saddam would likely continue to cling to power, and would become a hero in the process.

Alternatively, the Bush Administration could decide on a more limited military move. For instance, the US might decide to make do with strategic air strikes in Iraq, including targets connected to the development of WMDs (assuming, of course, that it is able to get intelligence on such targets). These attacks would likely be of greater intensity than any that have been launched on Iraq since the end of the Gulf War, and would be geared toward forcing the Iraqi regime into accepting a renewed – and more exacting – inspection regime to deny it the ability to develop WMDs.

The advantage to limiting its goals in this fashion is that such attacks would not require the US to obtain logistical assistance from neighboring states. However, if extended over a long period of time, such attacks could well provoke protests in a number of Arab and Muslim states. Moreover, it is not clear if an aerial

offensive would suffice in pressuring Saddam's regime to accept the Bush Administration's terms. In any case, reactions from Arab states to any US military operation would also be influenced by the degree to which the US demonstrates its determination to undertake and see through such an operation, regardless of any opposition.

However, if the US could point to a substantial connection between Saddam's regime and either Al-

> **A variety of considerations seem to have led the Bush administration toward seeking a channel for dialogue with Iran.**

Qa'ida, the terrorist attacks of September 11, or the spate of anthrax-tainted letters mailed to different parts of the US, the situation would be different. Were this to be the case, the administration's leverage would be would be considerably increased, as would be the willingness of other states to support or even assist in moves against Iraq. In the mean time, however, there is no indication that the US possesses proof of any such connection.

US considerations *vis-à-vis* Iran are different. Since 1984, Iran has stood at the head of the State Department's

list of state sponsors of terrorism. Iran is also hard at work developing WMD capabilities of its own; despite US efforts to stop Iranian development efforts, Iran has surpassed Iraq in this regard. On the other hand, the Bush Administration has certain expectations regarding moderating trends there, and has hopes that a more substantial dialogue might evolve between the two states. Such expectations may have been strengthened by Iranian President Khatami's publicly expressed reservations about the terrorist attacks on the US, and by his statements to the effect that Bin Laden's version of Islam was not the 'true' Islam. The removal of the Taliban regime, which was hostile to Iran, may serve to create a further Iranian interest in fostering such a dialogue regarding the future of Afghanistan. In addition, Iranian interests regarding the future of the Iraqi regime could also serve as a basis for dialogue with the US.

The sum total of these considerations seems to have led the Bush administration toward seeking a channel for dialogue with Iran. At the very least, US interests in such a dialogue would be in obtaining Iranian acquiescence to its fight on terrorism. Beyond this, the administration would likely want to exploit its present position to bring about a substantial change in Iran's foreign policy, ranging from issues like the support of terrorist organizations to the development of WMDs. However, in the meantime

there have been a number of negative indications stemming from Iran: the US intelligence community has information linking Iran to Al-Qa'ida prior to September 11, as well as information indicating that Iran has sheltered members of the organization since the fall of the Taliban regime; Iran has also tried to strengthen its ties to various factions within Afghanistan, in a fashion that threatens to undermine the stability of the interim regime set up there; finally, Iran also continues to support the Hizballah, and was behind the shipment of arms sent to the Palestinian Authority on board the *Karine A* (the arms ship that was intercepted by Israeli naval commandos on January 2 of this year). Moreover, to date all attempts to set up a constructive dialogue have apparently failed to achieve any results. The disappointment with Iran's behavior eventually led President Bush to publicly include Iran in the "Axis of Evil." With this in mind, it appears likely that if the Bush administration ultimately concludes that its attempts at dialogue have failed, it will likely consider the use of force to pressure Iran as well.

Conclusions

The Bush Administration is presently examining two sets of measures within the framework of continuing the War on Terror. The first of these includes a long series of political, financial and judicial steps to be taken against Al-Qa'ida cells and against other terrorist organizations in various states. The aim of these measures will be to undermine the conditions which allowed the Al-Qa'ida to flourish. The extent to which these measures prove successful depends on the degree to which the affected states cooperate with the US.

To that end, the US has a problem: the measures it is seeking to implement enjoy only limited support among in the Arab and Muslim world. Most of the regimes

> **Disappointment with Iran's behavior eventually led President Bush to publicly include Iran in the "Axis of Evil."**

in question are prepared only to take actions against Al-Qa'ida cells located inside their own territory: they have not yet shown any willingness to move against other terrorist organizations beyond the extent needed to ensure their own domestic security. It may be assumed that these regimes' sensitivity to external intervention in their domestic affairs, and their fear of internal agitation, will continue to constrain them with regard to both extensive cooperation with the US and the adoption of more far-reaching anti-terrorist policies. In light of these constraints, it can be assumed that the Bush Administration will be offering a mix of both incentives and pressures to induce maximal compliance with its interests. However, it is unlikely to long insist that these states take fundamental internal steps to avoid the growth of terrorist organizations.

The second set of measures includes military actions against a small number of states that are especially conspicuous in their support of terrorism. The Bush Administration appears undecided regarding the implementation of such measures, both given their complexity, and the fact they do not enjoy firm international support. The most likely suspect for a military campaign remains Iraq, where the administration has an interest in linking involvement in terrorism to the development of WMDs and its longtime desire to get rid of Saddam. However, there is considerable international opposition to an anti-Iraqi campaign, both in the Arab world and in the West. Unless the US is able to mollify this opposition in some fashion, it will find it difficult to take far-ranging steps. With that, the US does have the option of a more limited military strike, such as aerial attacks on Iraqi strategic targets, in order to force Saddam to re-accept an international regime for arms inspection.

US options regarding military actions against other states seem very limited at present. In the case of Iran, the Bush Administration had initially preferred dialogue to confrontation,

hoping that the aftermath of September 11 would improve the prospects for an Iranian-American *rapprochement*. However, the present failure of the dialogue between the two governments has led the American Administration to consider the exertion of pressures on Iran in order to substantially change its behavior. Syria is signaling its willingness to deal with terrorist organizations headquartered on its soil, though it will likely seek to get by with a minimum of activity in this regard. In any case, the Administration has not negated the possibility of military action against those states that continue to shelter terrorists, though this threat is intended primarily as a pressure tactic to ensure the cooperation of recalcitrant states.

> **Bin Laden's fall could actually strengthen existing Arab regimes in their fight against radical Islam.**

Finally, the swift collapse of both the Taliban regime and Al-Qa'ida's organization in Afghanistan could have other regional consequences. It could serve to strengthen America's image of power and its deterrent capability in the Middle East, which could well strengthen the ability of the US to press for Arab and Muslim cooperation in the War on Terror. Moreover, Bin Laden has emerged from the Afghani campaign weak and defeated – hardly the image of a hero. His swift fall may be popularly perceived by Muslims and Arabs as a blow to the cause of radical Islam. If this turns out to be the case, Bin Laden's fall could actually *strengthen* existing Arab regimes in their fight against radical Islam, rather than weaken them as had been originally feared.