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The War on Terrorism: Questions and Complexities

From the Editor in Chief

As this issue of *Strategic Assessment* goes to print, US bombings in Afghanistan are entering their fifth week. Comprising the first phase of the War on Terrorism declared by President George W. Bush following the September 11 attacks, these bombings have already shifted the balance of power on the ground. Taliban forces have withdrawn from key cities and the Northern Alliance has taken control over large swathes of the country's territory.

Yet the US-led campaign launched against Osama Bin Laden, and the Taliban regime that harbors him, leaves many open questions. These questions relate to the local, regional and international consequences of the campaign. Articulating these questions is a prerequisite to any assessment of the campaign's likely effectiveness in combating international terrorism.

On the local level, the extent and pace of the Taliban's collapse will determine the chances of achieving the capture and/or liquidation of Bin

Laden. Should the Taliban's expected withdrawal from Kabul merely result in its entrenchment in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan, Bin Laden would be able to exploit a combination of the topography and the winter climate to avoid the forces pursuing him. Only once events on the ground have been allowed to 'play out' will it be possible to determine whether the primary US objective of destroying the perpetrator of the September 11 attacks has been achieved.

In attempting to achieve this objective, the United States will be walking a tightrope. On the one hand, it is not easy to see how Bin Laden and the Al-Qaida infrastructure in Afghanistan can be destroyed without defeating the Taliban decisively. At present, the only force capable of doing the "dirty work" on the ground is the Northern Alliance. However, a Northern Alliance-led victory creates problems of its own. The United States cannot effectively operate in Afghanistan without the assistance of

Pakistan, whose military and intelligence services strongly oppose a Northern Alliance victory.

A second set of questions surrounds the potential negative regional consequences of the campaign. At the top of the list in this realm is the possibility that anti-American sentiments, and the popularity of the Taliban in Pakistan, could lead to an implosion of that country. While for the moment the likelihood of such an eventuality seems low – with few signs that the army may lose control anytime in the near future – predicting internal developments in the Middle East and South Asia has already proved hazardous.

Moreover, the monumental strategic surprise of September 11 points to the

danger of dismissing low probability threats, particularly in cases where the associated consequences are significant. Given its nuclear capabilities, Pakistan's possible implosion cannot be ignored. Were such a danger to materialize, it would entail the first-ever collapse of a nuclear-weapons state. This, in turn, would raise the specter of a number of nightmare scenarios, such as a takeover of nuclear facilities by terrorists.

Assessing the likelihood that the US-led campaign would lead to the destabilization of Saudi Arabia is equally difficult. In this realm as well, the United States faces serious dilemmas. Wishing to avoid being depicted as embarking on a "war of civilizations" against Islam, Washington attaches enormous

importance to gaining public support from the Saudi court. In addition, eradicating Bin Laden's financial lifeline is impossible without the full cooperation of the Saudi government and its intelligence agencies. Yet the greater the extent to which the Saudi regime is pressed to make its allegiance to the United States public, the greater is its exposure and vulnerability to growing anti-western sentiments in Saudi society at large.

Another set of questions concerns the extent to which the United States would view a successful execution of its efforts against Bin Laden and the Taliban as an opportunity to deal with other sources of strategic danger in the region. Clearly, a serious debate of this issue is being conducted within the Bush administration, with key officials

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arguing that the US should move to "close accounts" with Iraq. Others, however, point to the opposition that some of Washington's closest allies in the Arab world have already registered against a possible expansion of America's war aims. These allies have stressed that widening the United States' agenda would merely reinforce the position of those in the Arab world that have argued that the war declared against the Taliban is merely a pretext for America's 'real' aim of achieving hegemony in the Arab world.

The outcome of this debate is difficult to predict. Indeed, it is doubtful that a decision in this realm would be made before the results of the present phase of the campaign become clear. Unless Saddam Hussein forces Washington's hand by demonstrating his involvement in current acts of grand terrorism, decisions related to pursuing him are likely to be postponed.

Moving even further away from Afghanistan, predicting the effects of the September 11 attacks on the Arab-Israeli conflict is even more difficult. Washington's present "zero tolerance for terrorism" atmosphere is making it increasingly difficult for PA Chairman Yassir Arafat and his forces to continue the violence they initiated in late September 2000. On this, the United States has been unequivocal, refusing Arafat's requests to meet with President Bush until the Palestinian leader fully complies with his

commitments to end the violence. The Bush administration also took Arafat to task for claiming to oppose violence while refusing to confront the Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.

Moreover, through separate notes delivered to the Syrian and Lebanese governments, the Bush administration has also made clear its refusal to accept the continued terrorist challenge presented by the Hizballah. In so doing, it has rejected Arab attempts to create a differentiation between terrorism and "freedom fighting," and has given every indication that its efforts to fight terrorism would not end with Bin Laden.

Yet it is far from clear how the Bush administration would handle the expected opposition of some of its Arab allies, notably Egypt, to any effort to expand the anti-terrorism campaign beyond its initial focus on Bin Laden and the Al-Qaida network. Some of this opposition has already been made public – a sign of troubles yet to come. Whether the United States would be willing to expand the campaign even at the risk of straining its relations with Egypt and Syria remains an open question.

In the meantime, while creating an atmosphere less tolerant of Palestinian violence, the Bush administration has also made it more difficult for Israel to pursue its efforts to stem such violence. Clearly, it fears that television pictures produced by Israeli counter-terrorism measures and their consequences, and shown in such all-

Arab media outlets as Al-Jazeera, would further inflame Arab public opinion against the US. Consequently, it has urged Israel to avoid actions that might produce such pictures in the broadcast media. Fearing that equally troubling pictures would result from the chaos anticipated to result from a collapse of the Palestinian Authority, the Bush administration also asked Israel to avoid any measure that might bring about this outcome.

Thus the September 11 attacks and the "war on terrorism" declared by the United States in its aftermath have contradictory effects on the possible continuation of Palestinian-Israeli violence. Anticipating the "net effect" of these conflicting consequences at this early phase of the campaign is extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible.

Finally, it is even less clear what efforts the United States will attempt to make in the longer term to address the root causes that have led to the September 11 attacks. The United States has become increasingly aware in recent weeks – following the attacks and the reaction in Muslim states to the US bombing of Afghanistan – of the depth of anti-American sentiment and anti-western hatred in the Islamic world. Whether the United States would be willing to embark upon the monumental task of addressing the grievances that are at the root of this hatred remains at this point highly questionable.