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Redefining Security in the Face of Terrorism

Stephen Zunes

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have created unprecedented challenges for those who traditionally have been critical of U.S. military intervention and have allied themselves with the peace movement. For the first time in the lives of most Americans, the United States has found itself under attack.

After more than fifty years of fabricated or exaggerated threats to national security put forward by the U.S. government, academia, and the media to justify military interventionism abroad, even many traditional critics of U.S. foreign policy now acknowledge that there does exist a very real threat to the United States' security. Indeed, the ideology of Osama Bin Laden and his followers is apocalyptic and their methods are genocidal. Furthermore, their worldview is closer to that of the European fascists of the 1930s than of the leftist Third World revolutionaries of the 1970s who inspired many progressives in the West.

A significant minority of Americans, however, seriously question the wisdom of the U.S. military response. Some of these dissidents come from the pacifist tradition that takes a principled position in opposition to all war. They support nonviolent alternatives and argue that violence necessarily begets more violence. Other opponents of the Bush administration's war on terrorism come from the far left. They argue that given the nature of the U.S. role in the world and the powerful special interests that possess an inordinate amount of influence on policymaking—any such military intervention is inherently imperialistic. Still others emphasize utilitarian arguments against the use of large-scale bombing and other blunt instruments of power when dealing with a terrorist network where more targeted police or commando operations might be more appropriate.

The problem, however, in refusing to support military action is that such critics can easily be portrayed as naively acquiescing to dangerous forces that have demonstrated both the willingness and the means to do enormous harm to many thousands of innocent people in the United States. As a result, many former peace activists—even while cautioning against the more large-scale military actions advocated by administration hawks—are, for the first time, endorsing at least some sort of military response. At the same time, there are still very real moral and legal questions regarding certain aspects military action, even among non-pacifists. Furthermore, supporting military action feeds the very militarization of U.S. foreign policy that helped create the backlash so frighteningly manifested in the Al-Qaida movement and other extremist activities.

Despite such moral and legal questions and the dubious efficacy of responding to terrorism by large-scale military operations, it was clear from the

immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks that the United States would launch a major military operation as the centerpiece of its response. It was not going to be like a war against a foreign government, with clear fixed targets, such as command and control centers, intelligence headquarters or major military complexes. A loose network of terrorist cells does not have the kind of tangible assets that can be seriously crippled by military strikes. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan gave Bin Laden and his supporters sanctuary, but this was not a typical case of state-backed terrorism. As a result of Bin Laden's personal fortune and elaborate international network, he did not need and apparently did not receive direct financial or logistical support from the Afghan government. If anything, Al-Qaida had more influence over the Taliban than the Taliban had over Bin Laden.

Whether losing most of their sanctuary in Afghanistan will substantially reduce Al-Qaida's ability to inflict damage remains to be seen. The so-called "terrorist camps" destroyed in the air assaults, unlike bases of conventional armies, are not very significant strategically, since they housed few if any heavy weapons, sophisticated communications technologies, or other strategic assets that could not be quickly made portable. Most of these camps were evacuated long before the bombing commenced and much of the weapons and ordinance was moved as well. Ironically, a number of these camps were actually constructed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the 1980s.

Combined with the ousting of the Taliban and the killing and arrest of hundreds of Al-Qaida activists—including some leaders—the ability of Al-Qaida to commit further acts of terrorism has been diminished. How much so is debatable, but no credible intelligence report argues that it has been reduced by more than one-third. The instability in Afghanistan, which has resulted from the return of the warlords to power and the difficulty the new government has in controlling much of the countryside, raises questions as to how significant a reduction in Al-Qaida's activities in the country will ultimately result.

The U.S. bombing during the fall of 2001 resulted in widespread civilian casualties, which is particularly tragic given that the Afghan people were the first and primary victims of the Taliban, perhaps the most totalitarian regime on earth during its five years of rule. Such air campaigns have a mixed success rate, particularly in poor rural countries that have few obvious targets to destroy or damage. This is particularly true for Afghanistan, which saw much of its infrastructure already destroyed by the Soviet invasion and the civil war between the *mujahadin* factions that followed. The Taliban collapsed only after the U.S. military campaign began to provide direct support for the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban Afghan militias.

There is little question that the number of civilian casualties—both from the bombing as well as from the resulting refugee crisis—surpassed the numbers killed in the Pentagon, the World Trade Center, and on the four hijacked airliners. (One reason for the high number of civilian casualties was the use of bombing from jets instead of helicopter gunships, which can more easily distinguish enemy forces from civilians. The reason for choosing the high-altitude aircraft was because the Taliban and Al-Qaida was believed to possess hand-held heat-seeking Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which were supplied to the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan in the 1980s by the United States.) Whether some

Afghans will in turn seek vengeance over the deaths of their civilians at the hands of U.S. forces remain to be seen.

The U.S. victory over the Taliban regime was more difficult than some hoped and shorter than some feared. Similarly, thus far the victorious warlords of the Northern Alliance have proved to be not as violent and fratricidal as during their previous rule in the early 1990s, yet they have not been as cooperative as U.S. policy makers have desired. In any case, the image of one of the richest nations in the world bombing one of the world's poorest did inflame widespread anti-American resentment, particularly in the Arab world, regardless of the nature of the Afghan government or their support for Al-Qaida. As a result of the bombing campaign, the unprecedented sympathy the United States had in the Islamic world after the September 11 attacks has been lost. Both fairly and unfairly, the United States is being seen as responsible for killing thousands of innocent people, directly or indirectly.

Ridding the world of perhaps the most oppressive and misogynist regime on the planet could be considered a worthwhile result whether or not it enhances the struggle against terrorism. But questions remain of whether the regime would have collapsed from within in the ensuing months as some had been predicting, whether the suddenness with which opposition forces came to power will result in a weak government and long-term instability, or whether the devastation from the U.S. assault will create a reaction that will lead to the rise of new extremists in the future.

The bombing campaign against Afghanistan damaged the unity needed to deal with the very real threat posed by Al-Qaida operatives and distracted world attention away from the crimes of September 11 and onto the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the American attack. If there was any logic to the terrorists' madness, it was to have the United States over-react and turn large segments of the Islamic world against the West. Launching a major military operation against Afghanistan and threatening to pursue such actions into other countries has likely enhanced Osama bin Laden's standing, which may have been what he had hoped. In the struggle against terrorism, then, the bombing of Afghanistan only marginally improved the military equation but may have significantly set back the more important political equation.

There are no other countries outside the Taliban's Afghanistan that formally grant the Al-Qaida network sanctuary, but that has not prevented these terrorists from operating. High-altitude bombing—even putting the legal and moral arguments aside—is a very blunt and not particularly effective instrument in the fight against terrorism. Terrorism—even such large-scale atrocities as the September 11 attacks—should not be seen as acts of war, but as international crimes. The war analogy is dangerous for a number of reasons: It elevates the mass murderers who commandeered the airplanes from thugs to warriors. It gives license for a crackdown on civil liberties and other individual rights domestically.

The biggest problem, however, with the so-called "War on Terrorism" may be in that the decentralized, clandestine and elusive nature of the enemy bears less resemblance to a conventional inter-state war or even a traditional counter-insurgency campaign than it does to the failed "War on Drugs." It also leads to the question of when the United States can ever declare victory, raising the specter

of an indefinite militarization of U.S. foreign policy and the resulting negative impact upon civil liberties, immigrant rights, federal budget priorities, and other important political concerns.

Many progressives barely had time to grieve the tragedies of September 11 before having to start worrying about the frightening political implications of the Bush administration's response. Some of these concerns indeed appear to be coming to fruition.

Threats by the Bush administration to extend the war to Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and elsewhere seem based less on any evidence of links to Al-Qaida and more upon an apparent desire to use counter-terrorism as an excuse to punish regimes the administration doesn't like and to extend American military power. For millions of Muslims throughout the world, this vindicates radicals who have been claiming that the "War on Terrorism" was simply an excuse to expand American hegemony in the region and to settle old scores.

Another example regards the enormous increase in military spending advocated by the Bush administration—with apparent support from leading Congressional Democrats—that has been justified as necessary to fund the war on terrorism. But the vast majority of the proposed spending is for weapons systems and other expenditures that have nothing to do with counter-terrorism; indeed, many were originally designed to counter Soviet weapons that no longer exist. At a time of national crisis when a singularity of purpose is required, the two major parties are taking advantage of the American taxpayer to subsidize the arms industry, including a nuclear missile defense program that cannot protect the country from terrorist attacks.

From fiscal policy to civil liberties to trade issues to environmental concerns, the entire agenda of the political right is being advanced in the name of fighting terrorism. "Anti-terrorism" has become what "anti-communism" was during the Cold War: the manipulation of an outside threat to pursue ultra-conservative ideological goals, including the suppression of legitimate dissent. Also as during the Cold War, most prominent liberals have timidly accepted many of the assumptions and policies put forward by right-wing Republicans and thereby made thoughtful debate of American policies that helped create this terrorist threat extremely difficult.

At the same time, few things make people angrier than being taken advantage of in time of genuine need. It should be possible to both acknowledge the reality of the terrorist threat and the necessity of a strong and effective response by the United States while exposing the perfidy of the Bush administration in cynically manipulating the country's genuine need for security for the sake of its rigid ideological constructs and its wealthy financial supporters.

Since terrorism is an international problem, it needs international solutions. This means vigorously and collaboratively pursuing diplomatic, investigative and international police channels to identify, track down, arrest, and bring to justice members of terrorist cells responsible for these crimes. Precipitous and inappropriate military action could make many nations—particularly the Middle Eastern nations, whose support is needed to track down terrorists hiding within their borders—reluctant to cooperate in anti-terrorism efforts.

The Bush administration's success in 2001 in weakening international

initiatives to control the trafficking in small arms, curbing the threat from biological weapons and cracking down on money laundering and tax havens were all major setbacks to worldwide efforts to combat terrorism. Similarly, the steadfast American opposition to the establishment of an International Criminal Court damages one of the most effective tools possible for dealing with international terrorists. Only when the United States is willing to engage in effective preventative measures to fight terrorism will Americans really be safe.

Another policy shift must be away from supporting irregular groups that may be prone to terrorism. Many of the most notorious terrorists in the world today received their training from the CIA as part of U.S. efforts to undermine leftist governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan during the Cold War. Not only has the history of American support for terrorist groups like the Contras—whose attacks killed far more civilians than Al-Qaida—undermined U.S. credibility in leading an international coalition against terrorist violence, but much of Al-Qaida and the Taliban can trace their roots to U.S. support of the radical Islamic *mujahadin* in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

A major source of support for the reactionary Islamic ideology that has spawned terrorism has come from the widespread development of Wahabbi schools throughout the Islamic world, financed by Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have such financial resources in large part because of the vast amounts of money sent to that country from the United States to import its oil. A greater emphasis on conservation and renewable energy sources would substantially reduce the Saudis' financial ability to promote Wahabbism and go a long way in curbing the spread of this dangerous reactionary movement.

Simply addressing the security aspects of terrorism, as U.S. policy currently does, is merely confronting the symptoms rather than the cause. The struggle against terrorism cannot be won until the United States also ceases its pursuit of policies that alienate such large segments of the international community, particularly in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Third World.

The United States has become a target of terrorists largely for its perceived arrogance, hypocrisy, and greed. Becoming a more responsible member of the international community will go a long way toward making the U.S. safer and ultimately stronger.

To win the struggle against terrorism, security must be redefined. The more the United States has militarized the Middle East in recent years, the less secure Americans have become. All the sophisticated weaponry, all the brave fighting men and women, and all the talented military leadership the country may possess will not stop terrorism as long as government policies cause millions of people to hate Americans.

Americans have heard repeated assertions by President George W. Bush and others that the United States was attacked because of the terrorists' hatred of freedom and democracy. Unfortunately, however, United States policy in the Middle East has tended not to promote freedom and democracy, but to support authoritarian governments, occupation armies and further militarization of an already overly militarized region. Furthermore, while there is little question that Osama Bin Laden and others in Al-Qaida have little respect for Western liberal

democracy, there is nothing in their manifestos or any other statements that indicate that this was what motivated their attacks against the United States.

As most Muslims recognize, Osama Bin Laden is certainly not an authority on Islam. He is, however, a businessman who—like any good businessman—knows how to take a popular fear or desire and use it to sell a product: in this case, anti-American terrorism. The grievances expressed in his manifestos—the ongoing U.S. military presence in the Gulf, the humanitarian consequences of the U.S.-led sanctions against Iraq, U.S. support for the Israeli government, and U.S. support for autocratic Arab regimes—have widespread appeal in that part of the world.

On the day of the attacks, CNN decided to repeatedly show scenes of some Palestinians celebrating the attacks. Though their sentiments represented only a small minority of Palestinians, this small group was probably not alone in the Third World in feeling a perverse sense of satisfaction: finally, the United States knows what it is like to lose thousands of civilians in an act of political violence. This is not new to the Palestinians, or to the people of Vietnam, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, East Timor, Iraq, and Lebanon, who know the feeling all too well, not in small part due to the policies of the United States.

Indeed, watching the heart-rending scenes of anguished New Yorkers holding up pictures of their missing loved ones reminded one of scenes from Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s of the relatives of *los desaparecidos*, the “disappeared,” victims of regimes backed by the U.S. government.

Whatever the transgressions of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere, they can never justify acts of terrorism. There is nothing karmic about what happened on September 11. No country deserves to have thousands of innocent people slaughtered. Yet having the United States recognize why some extremists might resort to such heinous acts is necessary if there is any hope of stopping them.

Even the tiny percentage who may support Osama Bin Laden’s methods will be enough to maintain a terrorist network as long as his grievances resonate with the majority. Even if the United States succeeds in destroying the Al Qaida network, there will be new terrorists to take its place if Americans do not take a hard look at what gives rise to these fanatics. In short, it is not American values, but the abandonment of these values, which made the horrific attacks of September 11 possible.

There are those who argue that Osama Bin Laden’s political agenda should not be taken any more seriously than those of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, the 1960s cult leader Charles Manson, or any other mass murderer. Certainly anyone who would be willing to sacrifice thousands of innocent lives for any reason is clearly a psychopathic killer and is unlikely to be reasoned with or appeased through negotiations.

Yet terrorists whose political grievances have little political appeal—such as the far left and far right terrorist groups that have periodically arisen in relatively open societies like those in Western Europe and the United States—can be suppressed relatively easily. By contrast, terrorist groups whose agendas reflect those of systematically oppressed populations—such as Palestinian Arabs, Sri Lankan Tamils, or Northern Ireland Catholics—are far more difficult to control

without also addressing the underlying political grievances. Osama Bin Laden and his network may be more like the latter, only on a regional scale. Indeed, with the dramatic rise of radical Islamic movements worldwide and the growing Arab diaspora, the threat is global.

For years, progressive voices in the United States called for the withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East, a more even-handed position toward the Israelis and Palestinians, a cessation of support for repressive governments, an end to the punitive sanctions against the people of Iraq and a halt to the massive arms shipments to that already overly militarized region. If those in power had heeded these demands, it would have likely prevented the rise of anti-American terrorism in the Middle East; thousands of Americans and others killed on September 11 would still be alive today. It is ironic, then, that the very militarists whose policies led to the current crisis have successfully manipulated the threat they helped create to their own political advantage while marginalizing the prophetic progressive voices who warned that such consequences might be forthcoming if such misguided policies continued.

Whatever the most appropriate response may be in the short term, the most important thing the United States can do to prevent future terrorism is to change its policies towards the Middle East. Such changes will not likely satisfy Bin Laden and other extremists, but a more rational Middle East policy will seriously reduce their potential following and, by extension, their capacity to do damage. The United States should certainly not change any policy for the sake of appeasing terrorists. However, if policy changes that reduce the threat from terrorism are those which should be made anyway for moral or legal reasons, then the Bush administration would be irresponsible to do otherwise. (For example, it would be wrong for the United States to end its commitment to Israel's legitimate security needs in order to appease anti-Jewish terrorists. However, there does need to be an end to the unconditional U.S. military, economic and diplomatic support for Israel's rightist government and its occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, not only because it fuels the fires of anti-American extremism, but because it is wrong to support *any* government that violates basic principles of international law and human rights.)

Indeed, if the United States pursued a Middle East policy based more on human rights, international law, and sustainable development, and less on arms transfers, air strikes, and punitive sanctions, it would not only be more consistent with the country's professed principles, but would also make the country a lot safer. Ultimately, there is no contradiction between having an ethical foreign policy and one that protects the nation's security.

The United States will never be secure until it embraces a more ethical foreign policy. For America's greatest strength is not its weapons of destruction and far-flung military might, but the fortitude, the caring, and the noble values of its people.

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