

Article

Political vs. Military Solutions to Terrorism

John Maszka

Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115. E-mail: johnmaszka@yahoo.com

Accepted 13th November 2008

The war against international terrorism and its sponsors is a war unlike any we have ever known. There is no battlefield, no clash of armies. It is a war fought in the shadows and recesses of the world. Terrorism breeds among the hopeless and the alienated, in societies where democracy and economic opportunity are out of reach for most people. Military power alone will not end this scourge of mankind. Victory will require extensive international cooperation in the intelligence, economic, diplomatic, law enforcement and humanitarian fields. It will require a seamless network of cooperation between America and her allies (Hagel, 2003).

Key words are: Israel, foreign policy, constructivism, sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I want to discuss how terrorist organizations have successfully employed a number of political strategies to gain popular support in their respective communities, and compare these efforts to the largely non-political strategies employed by the Bush administration in its attempts to counter terrorism. As we consider these points, I think it's very important to keep in mind the positions of Senators Obama and McCain, and how they fit in relation to the existing order.

From September 14 to 17, 2001, Gallup surveyed individuals in 14 foreign countries on whether they thought that the United States should attack the country (or countries) serving as a base for the 9/11 terrorists ... of those surveyed only Israel and India supported a military attack. This poll reflected both the unpopularity of the military approach to terrorism, as well as the prevailing conventional wisdom against it. President Bush's argument that al-Qaeda hates "freedom ... life ... education ... and health care" is seen for the oversimplification that it is:

It is nonsense to claim that Al Qaeda and its sympathizers have no morality and simply want to annihilate Western civilization ... Even bin Laden has never preached destruction of Western culture or else, as he has taunted, "Why didn't we attack Sweden?" At every turn, bin Laden has sought moral justification for Al Qaeda's actions and demands (Atran, 2006).

There are two interpretations currently on offer in Iraq,

that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who argued that Islam mandates terror; Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in June 7, 2006, along with his wife and child when the US dropped two 500-pound guided bombs, a laser-guided GBU-12, and GPS-guided GBU-38 on their home), and that of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (who says Islam does no such thing and is compatible with democracy). If we are to believe President Bush, then the "terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own" are obviously of the first variety; and this is truly all we need to concern ourselves with.

After all, what does one do with parasites? One exterminates them. Parasites have no political cause for their circumstances, no justification for their actions, and no place among decent human beings. One does not need the consent or cooperation of the international community to do away with parasites, for they are worthless and meaningless. It's not important to understand why they are terrorists, or what oppression or desperation has brought them to these particular crossroads, it's sufficient that we simply blow them out of existence, along with any number of innocent civilians who happen to be in the vicinity (one is reminded of Elmer Fudd leaving mass destruction in his wake as he unsuccessfully attempts to blast Bugs Bunny).

Vice Admiral John Scott Redd, USN [retired] is very optimistic about the progress we've made, and the prospects for continued military success. Redd believes that the US is "better prepared today to fight the war on terror than at any time in our Nation's history, and we are getting better everyday" (Committee on Foreign Relations,

2006).

On the other hand, Crenshaw (2006) writes “that even the most extreme and unusual forms of political behavior can follow an internal, strategic logic ... Terrorism can be considered a reasonable way of pursuing extreme interests in the political arena.” But the Bush administration refuses to consider this possibility, for this would afford those who employ terrorism as a political tactic a voice, a face, an identity beyond that of “terrorist.” Rather than consider that groups employing terrorism may have a legitimate grievance, the Bush administration has instead chosen to flatly and unconditionally denounce the “terrorists” and vow retaliation:

...we're going to get them, no matter what it takes. This act will not stand; we will find those who did it; we will smoke them out of their holes; we will get them running and we'll bring them to justice. We will not only deal with those who dare attack America, we will deal with those who harbor them and feed them and house them.

What the Bush administration is missing is the bigger picture. Far more than an engaging game of “whack-a-mole,” the United States government is facing a worldwide mutiny against the existing order. Western governments must recognize that the tiny proportion of the population that ends up in terrorist cells cannot exist without the availability of broader sources of active or passive sympathy, resources and support.

But how do terrorist groups obtain this support from the broader population? Given the offenses committed by the Bush administration, angering Muslims by the millions, the greatest challenge that remains is to unite the Muslim population against a common enemy. Atran (2006) offers an explanation of how this is accomplished:

The edited snippets and sound bites favored by today's mass media have been used with consummate skill by jihadi leaders and ideologues, beginning with bin Laden himself. As a result, deeply local and historically nuanced interpretations of religious canon have been flattened and homogenized across the Muslim world and beyond, in ways that have nothing in particular to do with actual Islamic tradition but everything to do with a polar reaction to perceived injustice in the prevailing unipolar world...Historically and today, it is desecration of sacred places and perceived humiliation, even more than death and destruction, that has moved people to embrace violence.

“We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... [We] are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma.” Ayman-al-Zawahiri, 2005 (reprinted in Lynch, 2006).

Al-Qaeda is attempting to restructure the political iden-

tity of the entire Islamic population, primarily via the media. Much like any political campaign, al-Qaeda is targeting the “median voters of the Arab Muslim public.” While this target population may not be Islamist, because of their concern over American involvement in the Middle East and their fury over corrupt Arab governments, they are susceptible to Al-Qaeda's anti-American message. While al-Qaeda has been utilizing the media all along, it invested in this tactic more heavily than ever after the American strikes against Afghanistan. Zawahiri strongly believes in the need to obtain wide support of the public. He uses American intervention in the region to turn popular support against America.

Stern (2004) quotes from Zawahiri's autobiography, in which he refers to the “crusader” alliance and the “fundamentalist coalition” which opposes it, “It is anxious to seek retribution for the blood of the martyrs, the grief of the mothers, the deprivation of the orphans, the suffering of the detainees, and the sores of the tortured people throughout the land of Islam.” Stern cautions that the Bush administration is giving Zawahiri every media advantage he could dream of to muster support for al-Qaeda. Not only does Stern claim that the Bush administration's approach to fighting the war on terror is immoral when she refers to “the heart-wounding images of American soldiers humiliating, torturing, and killing Iraqi prisoners,” she also suggests that it's just not very smart:

If bin Laden were writing a script for George Bush and Tony Blair to follow, would he not command them to attack and occupy a Muslim country in defiance of the international community and in violation of international law? And would it not be his fondest wish to see the “new crusaders” humiliate those Muslims, and themselves, in the most graphic way possible? Having those soldiers photograph their crimes might have seemed too much to ask for.

Now consider Senator Obama. He's on a world tour proclaiming his intention to continue the military war on terror, and to take it to the soil of one of America's own allies. What is Senator McCain doing? He's proclaiming the need to continue the military war on terrorism as well. How long will it be before either of these candidates has the United States in direct opposition to the greater Muslim world? Both candidates are blindly assisting the efforts to radicalize moderates against the United States. In this great political campaign, what we need is a candidate that understands that the hearts and minds of over a billion Muslim people hang in the balance; not between Obama and McCain, but between moderate and radical. What we need is a candidate that can wage war where it can be won, at the negotiating table.

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