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Needed: A cool Assessment on Terrorism

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The so-called asymmetrical wars are in fact not unequal. If technology is on the side of Western armies, demography is on the side of the insurrection, as in Iraq. While Western public opinion cannot cope with losses, some of the asymmetrical wars do not seem essential to US national interests.

THE STATE Department has released, in April 2007, a report on World Terrorism for 2006. More than 14,600 attacks have been recorded -- an increase of more than 6% on the previous year. That gives the frightening figure of 40 attacks a day! The public in the West, particularly in the United States, cannot be but impressed by such figures. Should we be very worried about the future or is the State Department selling anxiety?

Two views on terrorism

There are two possible views on the terrorist phenomenon. One is to stress its tremendous importance as a threat to the security of the world and to prepare ourselves to soon face Weapons of Mass Destruction or WMD. The other is a cooler view, one that tries to analyse with some detachment, for example, whether the given numbers of terrorist attacks is not misleading.

To begin with, this total should not include attacks that are part of ongoing insurgencies, such as the ones in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Israel and the Palestinian territories; among others. Why should they be put on equal footing with terrorist attacks like Madrid, London or Bali? Is it appropriate to define Iraq as terrorism? A situation which requires the presence of 160,000 US soldiers can only be defined as a war, and to be more precise, a multi-faced insurrection using irregular warfare.

Does it make sense to label terrorism an insurrection where frontal battles occur, as in Helmand, Afghanistan or when a CH-47 Chinook is reportedly shot down by a rocket in June this year? Can we count as part of world terrorism the Israeli July 2006 campaign against Hizbullah in Southern Lebanon? What is going on between the Tamil Tigers and the forces of Sri Lanka cannot be technically labelled terrorism when the insurgency uses, apart from terrorists attacks, guerrilla warfare and frontal battles when circumstances are favourable and even, on two occasions has dropped bombs by air.

International jihadism

International terrorism, these days, is jihadist terrorism. In fact, between September 12, 2001 and the end of September 2007, jihadists have carried out, in 6 years about, 40 major attacks. The countries

which have been most targeted are, in order: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Turkey, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco. We should add the federation of Russia, when we consider the attacks on places outside of Chechnya (such as in Moscow, Beslan, etc.). They represent nine tenths of all attacks, while some other countries have been hit once: Kenya, Tunisia and Yemen. As far as Western countries are concerned, they have Madrid (2004) and London (2005).

The total number of deaths globally in those 6 years caused by jihadists is probably lower than the number of victims of 9/11 alone. The apocalypse predicted some years ago by Osama Bin Laden has been rather modest until now; Yet, 9/11 was the zenith of classical terrorism and a case in itself. Of course, a good number of planned attacks have failed to be delivered due to international police action. It is worth remembering that terrorism which is, by its very nature, covert activity organised by groups or movements working underground, is best dealt with through intelligence and police action. Since the end of 2001, national police establishments all over the world have been very efficient. Democratic countries, like Britain, once extremely liberal, have learned to tighten their rules after being hit.

Political Exploitation of Fear?

WMDs have been one of the obsessions of the West, and particularly the US, since 1995, when the Japanese religious sect Aum Shirinko killed with sarin gas 12 people and wounded many in Tokyo's underground. Yet, the WMD of Tokyo has not led to mass destruction contrary to the expectations of its perpetrators, and despite the absence of close monitoring by the Japanese police of religious sects at the time.

What is the aim of creating anxiety among the public and particularly in the US, by predicting the imminence of another attack of the magnitude of 9/11 or maybe the use of WMD? Could it be that we are witnessing a political exploitation of fear? What do we exactly mean by mass destruction -- what kinds of weapon; what amount of destruction? Maybe the biggest threat is in the use of the terminology. If these weapons are going to be used one day - and that may well happen - they will probably produce more mass panic than mass destruction. But let's not talk about the future. A cool assessment is first concerned about what has happened from 9/11 until today.

Some current misportrayals

What can be said about the current response to the terrorist phenomenon is the number of misleading portrayals that we can see. It is misleading to confuse insurrectional wars and random acts of terrorism in the global count of terrorist attacks. It is also misleading to speak of a "war against terrorism". A war waged against Iraq, for instance, could not be said to be directed against global terrorism. Today's terrorism is jihadist. It is more relevant to speak about "*al qaïdaism*" than about al Qaïda which has become a prestigious model for would-be jihadist.

In any case, most of the members belonging to the original leadership have died or are in jail.

Cyber-Jihad Generation

Al Qaïda, as an organisation, is today much less important than the Taliban. In Pakistan were its leadership is supposed to be. Their training camps are in very remote areas along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Few volunteers are able to join them from foreign countries. The man who has been speaking for al Qaïda in the last two years and a half is Ayman al Zawahari. Despite the most recent video of Bin Laden, there is still the question: is he still alive or not? Bin Laden is, anyhow, more useful to the Bush administration, alive than dead.

To be sure, Bin Laden has been able to create a dynamic which cannot disappear with him. A new generation that could be called the "cyber-jihad generation" has emerged, despite the fact they lack the training and sophistication of those who were called the "Afghans". But if a cool assessment has to be made about International Jihadism, one should point that it's a stronger movement on Internet than in reality.

What makes jihadists so specific is not religion; they are not a spiritual but a political movement. Ideologically, jihadists are still on the march. Armed forces alone cannot win this struggle. The real battle is ideological. But it seems improbable that the US will be able to discredit the jihadist ideology. That is the task of Muslim societies themselves. Consequently, jihadist terrorism is going to be active for a generation, or may be two. But it will never be able to shake the world's status quo. Terrorism is the weapon of the weak; paradoxically, what it shows, by its very existence, is the stability of the world order.

Nevertheless, terrorism is, above all, a psychological tool. It is also a tool in the battle of the minds and wills. On these grounds, jihadism should not be underestimated but taken very seriously. Yet, Jihadist terrorism is more of a very costly nuisance than a global threat, except on Internet. To be able to communicate virtually does not transform small autonomous groups into a cohesive organisation. A common ideology may unite but hardly coordinates. Anyhow, the fact is that in almost two decades, no group has been able to generate a mass Jihad. It failed in Algeria, did not succeed in Bosnia and "al Qaidism" in Iraq is marginal.

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