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Assessing the War on Terror

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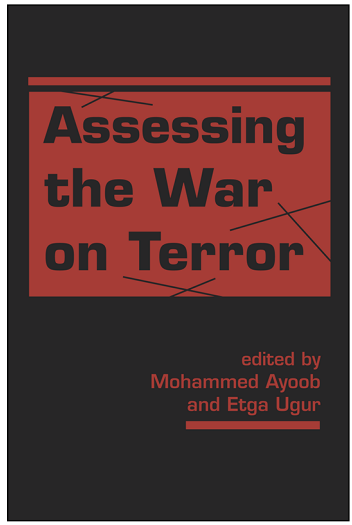

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1

Assessing the War on Terror

Mohammed Ayoob

The George W. Bush administration and its allies launched the war on terror following the terrorist attacks on the US homeland on September 11, 2001. The war on terror has wound down considerably especially since the Barack Obama administration took office. US troops had withdrawn almost completely from Iraq by the end of 2011, and US and allied troops are scheduled to withdraw from Afghanistan—the initial theater of the war on terror—by the end of 2014. In fact, there are indications that the withdrawal from Afghanistan may happen even sooner given the difficulties of counterinsurgency operations in that country and the rocky relations between Washington and the Hamid Karzai government in Kabul. There is a good chance that US and allied troop presence will have been considerably reduced in Afghanistan by the time this book is published.

This is a good time, therefore, to take stock of the achievements and failures of the war on terror. This is what we set out to do in this volume. We raise and where possible answer the following questions: Was the war on terror, especially the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, necessary in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11? What did these invasions achieve, and what have been their legacies for the two countries that became the immediate targets of the war on terror? What was the impact of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq on the greater Middle Eastern region in general and on Pakistan, the Arab

world, Iran, and Turkey in particular? How did the war on terror play out in terms of official policies and public opinion among America's European allies? And, finally, what has been the impact of the war on terror and domestic policies associated with it on US society and the rule of law in the United States?

The volume begins with Mark Katz's chapter comparing the Cold War era with that of the war on terror, with the assumption that just as the Cold War provided the contours of international relations between 1945 and 1990, the war on terror did the same for the first decade of this century. Katz argues that "the terms the *Cold War* and the *war on terror* have something in common: they refer not just to one conflict, but many conflicts that, to a greater or lesser extent, were—or are—linked to one another." In the latter case, these conflicts have included far-flung theaters that include Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Just as in the case of the Cold War, local dynamics have played a major role—often greater than global dynamics—in the unfolding of the war on terror in these diverse places, and analysts have often had trouble distinguishing the local from the global dimensions of this conflict. Again, like the Cold War, the war on terror seems to be ending in a whimper with US forces going home without achieving most of Washington's political objectives. At the same time, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have been rendered totally irrelevant in the context of the democratic uprisings in the Arab and Muslim world, not because of the successes achieved in the war on terror but because of al-Qaeda's inherent shortcomings that had from the very beginning made it a marginal phenomenon within the Muslim world.[1]

It is these shortcomings that form the centerpiece of the third chapter. Fawaz Gerges attempts to reveal al-Qaeda's deficiencies by addressing six major misconceptions—call them *myths* if you like—that have dominated much of the Western analyses of the al-Qaeda phenomenon and made it appear much larger than life-size. He explodes these myths one at a time and argues that "al-Qaeda poses only a security irritant, not a serious threat," and that its threat was always overblown. According to Gerges, the Achilles heel of al-Qaeda was the fact that it was unable to find traction in Muslim societies because it did not address the social, economic, and political concerns of Muslim populations. He concludes: "Tyranny, dismal social conditions, authoritarian political systems, and the absence of hope provide the fuel that powers radical, absolutist ideologies in the

Muslim world. It is not enough to focus on the violent ideology of al-Qaeda without devoting sufficient attention to the social conditions that gave rise to it. If the Arab revolutions [of 2011–2013] manage to fill the gap of legitimate political authority, they will annihilate the last dregs of al-Qaeda and like-minded local branches. Only then will al-Qaeda, like Osama bin Laden, not only die, but finally be buried." While the Arab uprisings have provided some political space to al-Qaeda affiliates, as in Libya, overall Gerges's conclusions seem remarkably prescient.

The fourth chapter by Michael Semple deals with the initial theater of the war on terror, Afghanistan. It analyzes not only the military campaign and its outcome but also the political, social, and economic ramifications of the US invasion, as well as the reordering of regional relations that followed the invasion of, and regime change in, Afghanistan. It concludes that while al-Qaeda was pushed out of Afghanistan as a result of the military campaign, US and allied strategies have failed to crush the Taliban that have reemerged as major political and military players in the country. A major reason for the resurgence of the Taliban has been the failure of the war on terror to address the endemic social, economic, and political problems of the country ranging from warlordism to rampant corruption. According to Semple, "The counter terror intervention held up a promise of societal transformation but then empowered those who lacked any such vision. Afghans were condemned to relive the old lesson that a combination of forces that can achieve regime change may prove wholly inadequate for establishing a just new order."

Semple refers to the intrusion of regional rivalries into the post-Taliban Afghan scene, a subject that forms a major theme of the fifth chapter by Christine Fair in the shape of the India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. Although initially Pakistan was not a theater of the war on terror, its relation with this war from the very beginning has been both intimate and multifaceted. In fact, it would not be wrong to argue that as the decade progressed it was Pakistan that became the central focus of the war on terror, with Afghanistan and Iraq serving as laboratories for regime change and counterinsurgency rather than counterterrorism.

The facts that Osama bin Laden found refuge in Pakistan close to a major military installation and that the Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan became the rear base of the Afghan Taliban and the central arena of al-Qaeda activity are testimony to the importance of

Pakistan in this war. Christine Fair brings out the complexities of Pakistan's relationship with the war on terror very lucidly, arguing that "despite Pakistan's historic contributions to the US-led war effort in Afghanistan and its assistance in apprehending al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan, its continued reliance upon the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, among others, has placed Pakistan at increasing odds with the international community, which has come to see Pakistan as both the firefighter *and* the arsonist."

The India-Pakistan rivalry has added to Pakistan's ambivalent approach toward the war on terror, especially as the United States has moved closer to India and as this has had repercussions on Pakistan's position in Afghanistan, enhancing the utility of Islamist militant groups in the eyes of the Pakistani establishment.[2] However, the latter's flirtation with Islamist militant groups has also come to haunt Islamabad as several of these groups have turned their guns on Pakistan's security apparatus, leading to a no-holds-barred fratricidal conflict. As a consequence, Pakistan has increasingly descended into chaos—an outcome that might have been averted in the absence of the war on terror.[3]

In the sixth chapter, Andrew Flibbert addresses the impact of the war on terror on the Arab world including Iraq. According to him, the war on terror was a "war of choice" as far as Iraq was concerned. Flibbert argues that "the architects of US policy in the Bush administration came to agree, by and large, on a few core strategic ideas that drove the war on terror and its central initiatives: the efficacy of military force for the United States; the need to address the domestic origins of international threats and challenges; the imperative of a dominant, if presumptively benevolent, United States, reshaping the world for the American and common good; and an emphatically bimodal, Manichean reading of international life—a starkly defined world of friends and enemies."

This overconfident and Manichean approach was evident most starkly in the conduct of the war on terror in the Arab world, not only in Iraq but also in other countries such as Yemen, and is likely to leave a lasting impact on the future course of relations between the United States and the Arab world. State failure in Iraq, with all its attendant anarchical effects, and the fact that "the war . . . allowed [Israeli] party leaders to harness the antipathy toward Islamism in the United States by reframing its conflict with the Palestinians as part of

an American-led war on terror" added to the negative perception of the war on terror in the Arab world.

Flibbert goes on to argue that despite these negative effects and the impossibility of establishing a direct causal linkage between the war on terror and the Arab Spring, the war on terror did unsettle the Arab world to such an extent that one can reasonably speculate that it provided the possibility for challenges to the existing order to emerge, culminating in the Arab Spring. Flibbert concedes that this is an argument impossible to confirm because of the unfeasibility of reconstructing history that leaves out the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq. It is worth noting, however, that others have argued that the US invasion of Iraq, which was ostensibly in the name of democratization but led to state failure and sectarian strife, delayed the outbreak of the Arab Spring by discrediting democratic transitions at least temporarily in the eyes of many in the Arab world.[4]

In the seventh chapter, Mohammed Ayoob deals with the implications of the war on terror for the two pivotal powers in the Middle East—Turkey and Iran—neither of whom were direct targets of the war but nonetheless were impacted in major ways by the twin invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the enormous consequences of these wars for the region. He argues that one of the major unintended outcomes of the war on terror was the dramatic improvement in Iran's regional security environment with the elimination of the Taliban and the regime of Saddam Hussein, Tehran's implacable foes in the region. At the same time, the twin invasions heightened Iran's sense of insecurity because of major US military presence on its two flanks. Iran, therefore, became both emboldened and more apprehensive, a combination that may have led among other things to its decision to pursue an opaque nuclear program that would preserve its weaponization option.

The war on terror, Ayoob argues, coincided with major changes in Turkey's domestic power balance both between the military and civilian elites and between the Kemalist establishment and the newly ascendant religiously observant political forces represented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP). These transformations produced a Turkish model of democracy that many in the Middle East found attractive and worth emulating. At the same time, the US invasion of Iraq, which the Turks initially opposed, paradoxically opened up opportunities for Ankara to increase its economic and political in-

fluence, not only in northern Iraq but in the Fertile Crescent as a whole. A combination of domestic and regional changes, therefore, enhanced Turkish prestige in the region while at the same time promoting greater Turkish activism in the Arab world and vis-à-vis Iran.[5]

The chapter concludes on the note that "in pursuing the war on terror through the medium of the twin invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States suffered simultaneously from goal confusion and imperial overstretch. The combination of these two traits that have defined both the Afghan and Iraq wars has provided the two preeminent powers in the region, Iran and Turkey, wider scope to promote their interests autonomously of US concerns and quite often against America's definition of its own interests. This is likely to be one of the lasting legacies of the war on terror as far as the broader Middle East is concerned."

In the eighth chapter, Rik Coolsaet looks at Europe, not a theater in the war on terror itself but a region that has suffered from acts of terrorism resulting from a backlash against the war on terror on the part of a very small minority of Muslim immigrants of diverse backgrounds residing in Europe. Major European powers' participation in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has been the principal motivation for such retaliatory terrorism, which reflects among other things a deep sense of alienation among segments of immigrant Muslims settled in Europe. However, such acts of terrorism have heightened existing European concerns about the lack of assimilation of Muslim immigrants—from North Africa in France, from Turkey in Germany, from South Asia in Britain—into mainstream European societies. This has proven to be a political bonanza for the extreme-right parties that thrive on anti-immigrant agendas in France, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. The current dramatic increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe can, therefore, be traced to the war on terror and its impact on major European societies.[6]

Coolsaet addresses this set of complex and intricately connected issues. He begins by asserting that 9/11 and its corollary the war on terror "reinforced pre-existing trends and tendencies, crystallized positions, and hardened points of view" in Europe. Although the fear of terrorism, despite the London and Madrid bombings, was never as high in Europe as it was in the United States, the presence of substantial Muslim immigrant populations in several major European countries helped give the terrorism issue a particular twist by linking

it with the issue of immigration and the alleged lack of assimilation of Muslim immigrants into European host societies. Coolsaet helps illuminate the fact that while this may have been one of the unintended consequences of the war on terror, it has left a lasting impact on the psyche of both the host and immigrant communities in Europe—heightening and legitimizing the former's Islamophobia and adding to the latter's sense of alienation and discrimination.

The penultimate chapter by David Cole addresses the impact of 9/11 and the war on terror on American society and especially on the exercise of civil rights during the decade defined by the obsession—part genuine part contrived—with terrorism. Cole argues that "one of the most important lessons of the past decade may be that the rule of law, seemingly so vulnerable in the attacks' aftermath, proved far more resilient than many would have predicted." He attributes this resiliency to the fact that "restraint of government was brought about neither by judicial enforcement of constitutional law nor by legislative checks on executive power, but by civil society's demands for adherence to basic principles of human rights." Cole's bottom line is that while certain excesses, especially against the civil liberties of Muslims and Arabs, did take place in the United States following the terrorist attacks of 2001, the constraints imposed by a civil society committed to due process and the protection of human rights mitigated and minimized the effects of such excesses and forced the Bush administration to renounce several actions that it had initially considered legitimate in dealing with "terror suspects."

Cole concludes that the US experience after 9/11 "underscores the continuing need for an engaged civil society committed to the ideals of liberty and law. The past decade suggests that the rule of law may be stronger than cynics thought. It teaches that adherence to values of liberty, equality, and dignity is more likely to further than to obstruct our security interests. But it also illustrates our collective reluctance to confront our past, a reluctance that threatens to erode our most important values." The record may, therefore, be mixed, but the outlook for the prevalence of the rule of law in the United States, even in the most exceptional circumstances, is not as gloomy as some human rights advocates had predicted in the wake of 9/11 and the launching of the war on terror by the Bush administration.

In the final chapter, Ian Lustick evaluates the legacies of the war on terror both domestically and internationally. He argues that the war on terror, especially the invasion of Iraq, "deeply divided the

country, distracted it from urgent economic and social problems, and inflicted incalculable damage to US credibility and prestige abroad." Additionally, it was responsible for "the reduction in our privacy and restrictions on our civil liberties associated with the 'Patriot' Act's techniques of blanket surveillance and incarceration of 'suspects.'"

After a thorough cost-benefit analysis of the war on terror, Lustick, in a damning indictment of the entire war on terror exercise, concludes that "for all these reasons—imbalanced and hysterical media coverage, political pandering, incentivization of terrorism discovery, huge economic opportunities associated with acting as if there is a serious terrorism threat, and fundamental psychological predispositions—we can be virtually certain that whatever our 'natural' or uncritical assessment of the terrorism threat, it is exaggerated. And here, in fact, is the most serious threat associated with terrorism. Terrified as we have been, and powerful as we are, we must stand guard against tendencies to unleash our power against nonexistent or minimally dangerous terrorist threats, while cutting resources from more significant problems and opportunities."

Whether one agrees completely with Lustick's assessment or not, the note of warning that he sounds at the end of the chapter is well worth serious consideration: "Overall, if we refuse to distinguish between threats (including terrorism) and serious threats (which, excluding nuclear weapons, do not include terrorism), and if we define ourselves as 'at war' with the terrorists, then the terrorists will have succeeded. They will not defeat us with their own strength. But they can devastate us by using our own strength against us. That is what has happened. We must not permit it to continue."

In short, the volume presents an array of analyses and reflections on the war on terror by a group of serious scholars engaged in studying different facets of the subject. I leave it to the readers to form their own conclusions after reading the chapters that follow about the necessity and utility of the war on terror and how well it has served US foreign policy objectives and the cause of international peace and security. There are aspects of the subject that have not been dealt with adequately in this book, for example the impact of the war on terror on Muslim Americans and their relationship with the state, as well as the use of the war on terror by countries such as China to justify their own policies of suppressing Muslim minorities. However, I believe that this volume, by raising the most important questions and trying to answer them as objectively as possible, will be instrumental

in paving the way for more comprehensive appraisals of the war on terror in the years to follow.

Notes

1. Gerges, *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*.
2. Padukone, "India and Pakistan's Afghan Endgames."
3. Rashid, *Descent into Chaos*.
4. For example, see "Without Iraq 'Arab Spring May Have Broken Out Earlier,'" *Spiegel Online International*, December 16, 2011, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,804204,00.html. Also, see Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Iraqi Revolution We'll Never Know," *Foreign Policy Online*, January 17, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/01/17/the_iraqi_revolution_we_ll_never_know.
5. Anthony Shadid, "In Riddle of Mideast Upheaval, Turkey Offers Itself as an Answer," *New York Times*, September 26, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/world/europe/in-mideast-riddle-turkey-offers-itself-as-an-answer.html?scp=3&sq=erdogan%20in%20cairo&st=cse.
6. See the essays in Cesari, *Muslims in the West After 9/11*.