Al-Ahram Weekly

The future of terror

grip of terror and its consequent effects will not ease until double standards are erased and legitimate liberation movements are recognized as such

Ayman El-Amir

7-13 January 2010

It has been eight years since former US president George W Bush declared a global war on terror and cajoled or coerced most pro-Western governments to join in. In the course of this war two countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, were aggressively invaded and destroyed, thousands of suspected militants rounded up, tortured and incarcerated, including in the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention centre. Scores of other suspects were sent for "enhanced" interrogation in some Arab countries that are notorious for their human rights records. Thousands of Muslim individuals, communities and organisations were intimidated, shut down or went underground. However, after years of hot pursuit, militant organisations and resistance groups seem alive, well supplied and growing in scope. The flawed anti-terrorism strategy conceived and implemented since 2001 needs to be reviewed.

While the war on terror seems far from over, it is increasingly proving more costly and less effective. After almost seven years of war in Iraq, the US military proudly announced that no US soldiers were killed in combat operations in 2009. But as a consequence of US military invasion and armed resistance Iraq has inherited the brunt of sectarian terror and political chaos, and Afghanistan and Pakistan are teetering on the brink of failed state conditions. Somalia has long been torn by violent civil strife and Yemen, the latest victim of civil strife, has become the epicentre of a regional war involving marginalised and disgruntled Yemenis of the north and south, Saudi Arabia, the US and Al-Qaeda fighters. The escalation in fighting has forced the US

and UK's embassies in Sanaa to close down. However, the two embassies reopened on Tuesday. Additionally, in spite of all airport security measures, a young Nigerian student, Omar Farouk Abdel-Muttaleb, was able to board an Amsterdam to Detroit Delta Airlines flight and detonate a crude explosive device onboard. In early November 2009, US Army Major Nidal Malik Hassan shot and killed 12 colleagues and wounded 31 others at Fort Hood base, Texas, in one of the worst home grown acts of violence in decades. With trillions of US dollars expended and hundreds of thousands of US troops dispatched to countries and territories half way around the world to pre-empt terrorism, terrorists are still reaching US shores. What went wrong?

For one thing, after the attacks of 11 September 2001 the US set out in a state of senseless rage to pour down its mighty firepower on the Tora Bora mountain range in Afghanistan, more in retaliation against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda's Osama bin Laden than a well-planned and effective anti-terrorism strategy. This was followed by a relentless war that seems to be going nowhere despite the reluctant support of the US's NATO allies. It seems more like a replay of the Vietnam scenario. Before President Barack Obama was sworn into office in January 2009 there was an estimated 32,000 US troops in Afghanistan. By December, when he made his decision to send additional troops, there were already 90,000 US troops. And the number keeps going up. Similarly, at the peak of the Vietnam War, in 1969, there was an estimated 525,000 troops who, still, could not win the war against the Vietcong. The US had to declare victory and scamper off to the Paris Peace Talks to work out "an honourable" withdrawal. In the Middle East, the US bungled the agenda by invading Iraq on the flimsy and unsubstantiated pretext of the existence of weapons of mass destruction. The pretext kept changing until it turned out to be the quest for control of the oil-rich Gulf region and securing the interests of Israel. The Bush administration confused the colonial economic and military agenda with its alleged global war on terrorism, undermining its credibility in both cases. With the present chaotic situation in Iraq, the US is not totally assured of its first set of colonial goals and has not won the battle against terror.

In rolling out its anti-terrorism campaign the US rallied disreputable political allies, particularly in the Middle East region. Most of them were discredited dictators in the eyes of their own people. This, in turn, sullied the image of the US and the purpose of its anti-terrorism crusade and reform efforts. Local autocrats mixed the agendas, using the campaign against terror to terrorise opponents at home who were pressing demands for democratic change, the end of corrupt practices, free elections and respect for human rights. In sorting out its choices, the US opted for alliances with oppressive regimes against the people they tyrannised and that turned against the US, its strategy and its regional collaborators. In time, some of the oppressed activists defected to join battalions of resistance fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan. By its own unholy alliances the US undermined its strategy. It was no surprise that when the Bush administration unfurled its Greater Middle East Initiative in 2004, calling for the spread of democracy and the end of human rights abuses, among other things, it was met with hostility from both the reigning elite and the suspicious masses at large who could not see any merit in a superpower that conquered and killed their Muslim neighbours in Iraq.

In waging the war on terrorism the US and its Western allies focussed on military goals and virtually neglected the political and social triggers of terrorism. This was in total disregard of the long and inconclusive debate within the United Nations to examine the political, social,

economic, and human rights grievances feeding the growth of terrorism. In the aftermath of 11 September, the Bush administration was seized with the spirit of military revenge, not political debate. And it still is. The US and its NATO allies have yet to prove that they will be the first campaigners to subdue Afghanistan since the first British invaders suffered a disastrous defeat there in 1842. Ignoring political factors in the fight against terrorism will be equally disastrous for the Western alliance and its endeavours.

After the heavy blow to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001 the two organisations have mutated and acquired a new life, as evidenced by the spread of violence to Yemen and Nigeria. Somehow, Israel's military violence in the Middle East is no cause for alarm on the Western agenda. There is no telling where violence will erupt next, whether as a spate of unjustified terrorism or as national resistance against foreign occupation or domination. Western powers legitimised terrorist action against Nazi occupation forces during World War II and built the right of armed resistance into the body of international law, but has denied it to the Palestinians in their own occupied territories. The first anniversary of the Israeli invasion and destruction of Gaza is a poignant reminder that Israel is a state that often behaves like a terrorist organisation with Western blessings while Hamas, which is classified by the West as a terrorist organisation, often behaves like a responsible state. This Western double standard will have to change, as part of a more comprehensive policy, if the West wants to send a global message that it regards international law as indivisible and that it believes in the spirit and letter of the UN Charter that it crafted 64 years ago. Terrorism, which is deliberately confused with legitimate national liberation for political convenience, will continue to spread and become more lethal until the wheat is separated from the chaff and issues are addressed in a politically responsible way.