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## Is al-Qaeda Winning?

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What does it say about Washington's "war on terror" that dozen and a half people with paper cutters forced hundreds of thousands of Western troops into the battlefields of the "greater Middle East" region;

That 100,000 foreign soldiers are bogged down in occupied Afghanistan wondering how many dozens of al-Qaeda operatives have remained, if any;

That the most liberal democracy enacted new controversial illiberal laws and unpatriotic practices under its "Patriot Act";

That one shoe-bomber has forced millions of people to take off their shoes every time they take a flight;

That one underpants-bomber will expose every other traveler in most humiliating of ways;

That after US loss of deterrence and prestige as well as trillions of dollars of military and other expenditures, al-Qaeda's top leadership remains at large; its bases/cells proliferate globally; that volunteers continue to flock into its ranks and young supporters to its websites... !!! And above all that it continues to terrorize America and Americans.

So much that one gets the impression that America is fighting a world superpower despite the incredible disparities in capacity, numbers and support.

Is al-Qaeda winning? Has the United States lost?

## **Hitting the Jackpot**

A dozen years ago, a demoralized group with nowhere to go but the hills of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda began targeting America instead of the region's authoritarian regimes hoping to destabilize the region, bloody America's nose and gain popularity.

Its strategy was simple: Draw the US into direct confrontation against and within the Muslim world. Like sheep to the slaughter house, America walked right into its trap.

Al-Qaeda was lucky. With a 'cowboy' and so-called "chicken-hawks" (militarists who ever served in the military) dominating the White House and the Pentagon... military escalation was only a question of time and intensity.

The Bush administration decided to "take the war to the enemy so as not to fight it at home". This is exactly what al-Qaeda hoped for considering it wasn't applying for Green cards for its members.

It all went as smooth as a scripted movie. After the 9/11 attacks at the pillars of its world status, the Pentagon and Wall Street, the wounded superpower went on a rampage. Like a bull in a china shop, it responded with little or no thinking of the consequences of its military actions.

Warmongers took advantage of the threat to US national security to advance their military agenda in foreign policy and the radical American Right exploited what they termed as the threat to "our way of life" to transform America's way of life towards the Right.

Washington called for a "crusade", then changed it into a "war" on terror and under its guise, went on to occupy Afghanistan and Iraq and support Israel's bloody wars in Lebanon and Palestine. It also intervened in Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan and put direct pressure on its allies to confront their Islamist movements.

In no time, the US was preoccupied by its draining occupation and costly military operations. And as expected, the terrible human cost only added petrol to the flames of hatred.

Paradoxically, anti-Americanism has been more rampant under "friendly regimes" like in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey etc. than others.

America's unfortunate and disproportionate use of military force to defeat a segmented, mobile and polycentric movement of several hundred core groups of fighters didn't make it any more secure or dissuasive.

As the Obama administration asks for \$33 bn extra budget above the already approved \$660 bn for 2010, I remember what Richard Meyers, the former head of the US joint chiefs of staff, **told**

me several weeks ago how a decade later, the US still doesn't have a strategy to deal with "the global insurgency" facing America.

### **Beyond military**

Popular opposition and world denunciations of US military campaign has fallen on deaf ears in Washington. Instead of seriously reversing its military expansion, the Obama administration has accelerated it in the Afghan-Pakistan area and it seems adamant to repeat more of the same in Yemen.

Needless to say, no serious strategic analyst would advise abandoning military power all together. However, Washington's dependency on, even addiction to, firepower has neutralized or nullified all other efforts towards defusing support for al-Qaeda and truly winning hearts.

Good-will gestures provided by President Obama and his attempts to reconnect to the Arab and Islamic world on the basis of "mutual interest and mutual respect" can hardly be heard considering the echoes of drone fired missiles, speeding F-15 jets and rolling tanks.

The more Washington used its military force, the less it won the minds of those it needs most to defeat al-Qaeda: Americans, Arabs and Muslims.

Likewise, US military actions are harming its intelligence and law enforcement work that over the last decade have dealt the greatest blow to al-Qaeda's leadership and organisation.

### **Zero Sum strategy**

As military adventures kill, maim and destroy lives, they create, nurture and build animosities and "alliances" among most unlikely allies, such as a young rich Nigerian that studies in London, a Jordanian doctor that studies in Turkey and an Arab-American soldier trained by the Pentagon, all whom were ready to die to hurt America.

And likewise, counter terror tactics and intelligence work has made it ever more difficult for public diplomacy to "win hearts and minds". Instead of listening to people of the region, it has been spying on them and instead of reading them their rights, it has tortured them in far-away prisons.

And instead of hearing out their concerns and fears, Washington has underlined its own above all others.

In that limited and limiting spirit, for example, mostly impoverished Yemenis that suffer from war in the north, intensive conflict in the south and three decade autocratic regime, must now worry about US fears, and cater to US interests above their own.

Which brings us back to our initial question: al- Qaeda is winning only as far as Washington is running a self-defeating war.

However, one needs to remember that in the self-defeating war on terror, winner and loser is one and the same.

As long as America puts its security preoccupations and political interests about those under its military and strategic domination, the Pentagon and al-Qaeda will feed into one another and the Americans, Arabs and Muslims will continue to be the ultimate losers.