US Terrorism Report: Selective Data, Wrong Lessons.

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The data provided in the US State Department's annual terrorism report for 2007 points to some interesting if puzzling conclusions. The much publicised document, made available 30 April via the State Department's website, makes no secret of the fact that Al-Qaeda is back, strong as ever. It also suggests that violence worldwide is nowhere near subsiding, despite President Bush's repeated assurances regarding the success of his "war on terror".

Will the report inspire serious reflection on the US's detrimental foreign policy and its role in the current situation?

Let's look at some of the data. To start with, take Pakistan. Al-Qaeda or Al-Qaeda-inspired attacks in the country more than doubled (from 375 to 877) between 2006 and 2007. These attacks have claimed the lives of 1,335 people, compared to 335 in a previous report. That is a jump of almost 300 per cent.

Then there's Afghanistan, which was supposedly "liberated" shortly after 11 September 2001. The number of attacks reported there increased a sharp 16 per cent in 2007. Some 1,127 violent incidents killing 1,966 people represent a significant surge in violence compared to 2006's 1,257 deaths.

There have also been many other violent incidents around the world, including but not limited to North Africa, the terrorist bombings in Algeria in particular.

But this is barely half the story — or 40 per cent of it, if we want to be as specific as the terrorism report. Iraq accounted for 60 per cent of worldwide terrorism fatalities.

Considering the fact that the horrifying violence currently witnessed in Iraq was unheard of prior to the US invasion of 2003, will the Bush administration take a moment to connect the dots? Even a third grader could figure this one out: the US occupation was a major, if not sole factor, in Iraq's relentless bloodbath. In order to right the wrong in Iraq, the US military should clearly just withdraw, and Bush — or whoever next claims the White House — should stop fabricating pretexts to justify a prolonged mission.

On 1 May 2003, President Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq. As he stood on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln a huge banner behind him bore the words "Mission Accomplished". The New York Times then wrote, "the Bush administration is planning to withdraw most United States combat forces from Iraq over the next several months and wants to shrink the American military presence to less than two divisions by the fall."

Instead, more than five years after Bush's speech, the administration seems determined to maintain a military surge, having added 20,000 soldiers. Making no apologies for the war's contribution to an increase in terrorist activities, Bush's officials continue to rationalise the surge as a commonsense response to ongoing violence, conveniently omitting the US's own part in this violence. The State Department report doesn't classify any of the thousands of innocent victims killed by US or coalition forces as victims of terrorism.

Russ Travers, deputy director of the Counterterrorism Centre, stated on the day the report was published, "It's a fair statement that around the globe people are getting increasingly efficient at killing other people." While Travers' assertion is undoubtedly true, there seems to be no intention of providing any context, no connection drawn to the US's direct invasions, or indirect but equally devastating role in campaigns of violence, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan.

But what the State Department's terrorism report didn't fail to do was once again identify Iran as the world's "most active" state sponsor of terrorism. As reported in the Associated Press on 1 May, Iran was responsible for "supporting Palestinian extremists and insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, whereÉ elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps continued to give militants weapons, training and funding."

The irony is that the report further contributes to the US's long-touted case for war against Iran; ironic because the report's findings, if viewed responsibly, substantiate the claim that the Bush administration's policies have only made the world more unsafe. Wouldn't a war against Iran hike up the number of violent or terrorist incidents?

It also remains unclear how powerful Al-Qaeda really is, and how much of its capabilities were hyped in order to enable the Bush administration to continue its mission. Consider the two occasions Al-Qaeda was back in the news recently.

News media cited official Afghani reports attributing the recent assassination attempt on US-ally Afghani President Hamid Karzai to Al-Qaeda. In other reports, the US rationalised its own assassination of a leading Somali militia leader Aden Hashi Eyrow on 1 May as targeting a key Al-Qaeda member. It's not the logic of the assassination that is key here, but rather the fact that while Al- Qaeda has reached a position of strength that can penetrate several layers of defences in Afghanistan, the US is getting itself involved in a regional feud in Somalia. Why would the Bush administration be chasing Al-Qaeda in Somalia, as in Iraq, if the group is reportedly in the most powerful position in Afghanistan?

Moreover, if Al-Qaeda indeed exists on such a large and influential scale in so many countries, isn't it time to question the logic used by the Bush administration's "war on terror" that was meant to weaken and destroy Al- Qaeda in the first place?

It may be, of course, that Al-Qaeda's power and outreach is inflated for political reasons, where every conflict the US is involved in becomes immediately reduced to those who support, shield or host Al-Qaeda or Al- Qaeda inspired groups, thus justifying US military intervention anywhere.

Instead of dealing with the obvious truths that the terrorism report highlights, the authors of the report have resorted to another logic that places blame squarely on external circumstance, never holding the US government accountable for its actions.

Finally, is there really a need for lengthy reports that cost large sums of money and thousands of work hours if the lessons gleaned are always the wrong ones, leading to more blunders that prompt more violence, and more terrorism reports?

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