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DATELINE WASHINGTON

The blunder that cost the war on terror

by Ashish Kumar Sen

LEAVING Afghanistan unfinished and starting the Iraq war has not only let the Taliban and its Pakistani supporters off the hook, but radicalised world opinion against the US and spawned several little al Qaidas

Professor Scott Atran is an expert on Islamic terrorism who teaches at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris. He has been briefing senior government officials in Washington on the evolution of global jihadi networks in the Middle East.



Professor Scott Atran

In an interview, Atran says if the United States had concentrated on the war in Afghanistan and opted for sanctions against Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, things today would have been very different.

Is al Qaeda any weaker as a result of the U.S.-led war on terror?

Al Qaeda doesn't really exist any more. It has been operationally dead for a long time. They haven't done an attack that's specifically al Qaeda since Tunisia in 2002.

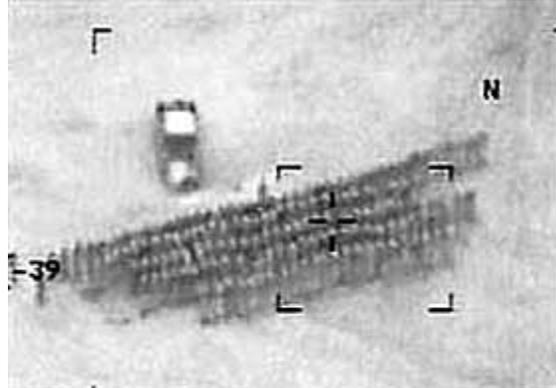
In terms of their central command and control they have been out of the picture for a long time. They don't know who many of the terrorists are and couldn't even communicate if they did know.

My suspicion is al Qaeda had nothing to do with the London bombers. What happened was those guys tried to get in touch with al Qaeda and that's they way they were caught. But as far as al Qaeda is concerned, as an operational group that is able to carry out logistical and tactical operations, it is finished.

After 2003, Washington's focus shifted to Iraq. The war on terror started with Bin Laden as a target. Did the invasion of Iraq adversely affect the war on terror?

Yes. The war in Iraq has also radicalised Muslim opinion around the world. It has alienated most of Europe.

In Pakistan there was an announcement by a general that they would leave bin Laden alone. Pakistan is not serious about this [war on terror]. They never were. They go into Waziristan whenever the United States applies pressure. They get beaten up by the tribesmen and then they come back out. That has just got all the mid-level officers angry. They are not going to do anything to catch bin Laden. Of course, opinion in Pakistan, like elsewhere, is radicalised against the United States.



Taliban fighters have been appearing in larger numbers in Afghanistan. A US Defence Department aerial photograph. — AFP photo

If the United States had concentrated on Afghanistan and put sanctions against Saddam Hussein the results would probably have been very different. The world gave support for the Afghanistan invasion, not the Iraq one.

Does Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf have the support of the army in the war on terror?

The Pakistani army is very much split. Americans who have been involved in the hunt for bin Laden are stunned by the sympathy of the ISI [Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence] for the Islamists.

Musharraf himself has committed to some kind of alliance with the United States. They are playing some kind of double game. Musharraf, especially since the jihadis have been trying to kill him, has been concentrating on actually trying to work with the United States but the army itself isn't all that interested.

The ISI will only help if it serves their interest and getting bin Laden doesn't serve their interests. Why would they want to stir up the population?

In what way have terrorist groups evolved since September 11, 2001?

In terms of the al Qaeda-inspired groups – European and Middle East groups –they have become much more highly diversified. There was never really any recruitment into jihadi groups, it is all enlistment. Even in the al Qaeda heyday, when they came to Afghanistan, they only took 15-20% of the people when they came knocking at their door.

But now it is almost totally self-enlistment. In Europe it's through the Internet. They meet one another, get together and get inspired by things they hear. It is now a media-driven, transnational political awakening. It happens to be dynamic in terms of its ideology.

Suicide bombings and spectacular acts of terrorism keep it flowing into people's minds and makes it sort of a ready attractor for people who are not particularly happy with the way things are going in the world. And they see through the Internet and the media that things aren't going that well.

It's pretty much self-starting. The difference is you can take out one of these groups and have no effect other than inspire another group. Whereas in the past if you took out an al Qaeda operational chief like Mohammed Atef or Abu Zubaydah or Khalid Shaikh Muhammad it would have profound effects on their ability to operate. This isn't the case any more.

This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that they are really not very capable of large-scale, massive operations. In the London bombings plot who knows to what extent they would have been able to do this. Such a complex plot by so many amateur actors leaves them open to being caught.

What made al Qaeda such a formidable adversary was the fact that they were pretty well organized and tightlipped about their activities.

The bad news is that these groups are so decentralized and dispersed that the standard ways of trying to deal with these things, especially through the intelligence of police networks, aren't all that efficient. Fortunately again they are pretty much amateurs and bungle most of the things.

Is there any way a war on terrorist groups can be won?

I don't think it's going to be winnable through strictly police and military actions. It is very similar to the anarchist movement. The people who joined the jihad are fairly well educated and at least as well off or better off than the surrounding population. Engineers are the category most represented in the jihad. There are also physicians and computer specialists.

These are highly motivated people and they are committed, which is not the case of the police and the regular army against them. And they are dispersed all over the place. How do you fight something like that? You could do good police work.

This idea that you should try to defeat Salafism is crazy – it is an ideological movement and is not necessarily inherently violent. You can't tell a Christian fundamentalist don't believe in fundamentalism. The thing is to try to move people within their own belief system to less belligerent paths.

How would you rate the Bush administration's war on terrorism?

They have succeeded in pretty much destroying al Qaeda but in the process they have created a lot of little al Qaedas and of course they have alienated most of the world from the United States.

The big gorilla on the block that is almost never mentioned in U.S. discourse is oil – fossil fuels. This whole thing about Iraq and Iran would mean very little both in the West and in the Muslim world if it wasn't for the strategic competition for these resources. In the next few years the competition will only be getting more intense.

You have been briefing senior government officials on the evolution of global jihadi networks in the Middle East. What have you been telling them?

I have been telling them about ways to defuse the tension with Iran and the Palestinian-Israeli front, which most people in the world consider to be the principal faultline of world conflict today, and the idea here is that sacred values, symbolic values are more important in cultural clashes than are material values.

For example, we proposed peace deals to the Palestinian refugees and the Israeli settlers – what we find is that when we offer them material incentives then their outrage and violence increases. But if they are offered non-material incentives like an apology violence goes down and support for a peace deal goes up. Those kinds of things work a lot better than material incentives.

I'm trying to open lines of communication with the Hamas. The Hamas would really like to not have to depend on Iran. They have Islamist ideology but they have no global jihadi agenda. They have never let al Qaeda have any influence over them. And their association with the Hezbollah is simply a matter of necessity to survive. They would be willing to talk to the Israelis, in fact they are trying to.

Was the international boycott a factor in Hamas softening its stand and opting for talks?

There are a number of converging things that caused Hamas to soften its position. One is the reality of governing. They are now responsible for a government. They have to make their society viable. A0

And the other was that they were stunned by the effectiveness of the boycott. But the willingness is absolutely genuine. We have been doing negotiations, we have been getting Kassam missiles back. They are waiting for a gesture from the West but the United States by law can't talk to them and the Israelis are completely paralyzed – the government is in chaos.

You just got back from Gaza. How successful has the Israeli security barrier been in containing terrorism in the region?

Zilch. Zero. It has stopped suicide bombers. The facts are there. It has caused a severe drop in the ability of organisations to do suicide bombings. But it hasn't been successful against anything else. It is obvious the wall didn't work. Now the Israelis don't know what to do.