

## Ten Years of 9/11 and End of Terror?

Arabinda Acharya\*

International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

The year 2011 was singularly eventful in respect of the world-wide fight against terrorism. Not only did it mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, it also witnessed some landmark developments that would determine the future of the global jihadist movement and our fight against the same.

Since 9/11, terrorism perpetrated by Al Qaeda and the jihadist movement associated with it has often been seen as an existential threat. The jihadists have also succeeded in changing our way of life, the way we perceive security and our relations with others. They continue to cause fear and anxiety which often clouds rational judgment in articulating our response to the threat.

But there is nothing to suggest that this would be a long or generational conflict or that the jihadists would be able to overturn the Westphalian state system. On the other hand there is ample reason to argue that the events of past few months could be the turning points in the decade-long fight that the world is embroiled with.

### Milestones to Victory?

In 2011, Osama bin Laden, the founding-leader of Al Qaeda, Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, involved in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and Anwar al-Awlaki, the US-born leader of Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were killed along with many other key leaders of the jihadist movement.

In June 2011, President Obama confirmed the beginning of gradual troop pullout from Afghanistan from July 2011, a process, which is scheduled to be completed by 2014. In December 2011, the last of the U.S. troops rolled out of Iraq, marking the official end of Washington's operations in the country.

All these developments coincided with an unprecedented and almost unusual uprising in the Middle East, more generally in the Arab world – the Arab spring - which, according to most assessments, put a dent on the jihadist movement by demonstrating that political objectives could still be achieved without resorting to bombings and indiscriminate killings – the tactics the term jihad has become synonymous with.

### Has the World become a Safer Place?

Can we then say that the fight is now over and declare victory? More specifically, can we now say that the world has become a safer place than what it was before 9/11?

Considering the number and spread of the attacks and the metamorphosis of the adversaries (from centralized entities to home grown or leaderless jihadists or both) after 9/11, it is quite difficult to say outright if we are really succeeding in the fight against terrorism.

### Metastasis of the Adversary

Arguably, from a tactical perspective, the military strikes against Al Qaeda and its associates and a host of measures adopted to target their financial and support structures have yielded noticeable results. As a group Al Qaeda is far less than its former self with a handful of core members and a scattered network of associates. But decapitation

has not been particularly debilitating for Al Qaeda or the movement. Instead, world is now dealing with many local Al Qaedas. The threat from terrorism has morphed from organized entities to “networks” or “franchises,” or to individuals acting on their own in “leaderless jihad.” More and more people, especially the youth, are joining the ranks of the jihadists. Terrorist attacks, especially those grouped under perpetrator characteristic – *Islamic Extremist* - by the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS) of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), have increased exponentially from 498 in 2004 to 6547 in 2010, and the trend continues to worsen. Even the state sponsorship of terrorism has resurfaced albeit in a different form.

### Pullouts from Iraq and Afghanistan

As far as Iraq is concerned, there is a perception that the Americans left the country in a mess for the Iraqi's to clean up. Brutal terrorist attacks continue with sectarian cleavages threatening the fragile democracy in Iraq. But from Washington's perspective, the instability in Iraq has ceased to be of a major concern; it is no longer America's problem to deal with. The same is the case with Afghanistan, which is in a bigger mess than Iraq, conditions deteriorating by the day, with Americans and their NATO allies marching their troops back to home by orchestrating what President Obama called “a transition to Afghan responsibility.” No one is sure if the situation in Afghanistan would get better after the foreign troops leave the country. Even within the U.S., there was widespread scepticism involving the timing, size and pace of the draw down. Some see the troop withdrawals potentially jeopardizing hard-won gains. Others consider it appropriate as it would create a sense of urgency for the Afghanistan government to put its acts together. The question however remains if the Afghan government is ready to bear the burdens of transition.

### Perception of the U.S.

Simultaneously, even with plans to disengage from conflicts that galvanized the anger against Washington's policies in the past, and the “Obama effect,” the perception of the U.S. in the Muslim world has not changed for the better. Muslim attitudes about the U.S. are as poor as ever, aggravated by a perception that Washington played a largely passive and reactive role in the Arab Spring.

All these reinforce the argument that we are no closer to victory, despite trillions of dollars spent especially by the U.S. and its allies, and the loss of lives of soldiers and civilians in almost all parts of the world? Thus, while policies such as bringing the troops back from Iraq and

\*Corresponding author: Arabinda Acharya, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Tel: +65-67906249; E-mail: [ISArabinda@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:ISArabinda@ntu.edu.sg)

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Afghanistan might reduce the risk of American casualties, it is difficult to say with certainty that the overall risk of terrorism from the jihadist movement has been reduced, not only for the U.S., but also for the world at large.

### **Bringing the Conflict to an End**

How do we then bring this conflict to an end? Despite ambiguity, the end of the fight has been articulated in a number of ways. From the perspective of the jihadists, the war would end with the defeat of the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan characterized by its military disengagement from the respective countries, the same way the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. By that time also, the U.S. would have been exhausted both militarily and economically to support or prop up friendly regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. This theme has been consistently peddled by the groups and senior leaders of the movement. By pegging the statements like victory of the mujahidin to specific events (attacks), the leaders strive to maintain the momentum of the fight.

On the other hand, it is being asserted that the fight against terrorism is succeeding and the time has come to declare that it is over. Hence the killing of bin Laden and other senior figures of the movement, the end of military engagement in Iraq and the pull back from Afghanistan could be considered as significant milestones towards victory in the fight.

At the same time the jihadist movement appears to be under severe stress from within. There is growing backlash from Muslims themselves against jihadists strategy of steadily escalating the degree of violence, and indiscriminating attacks including those against fellow Muslims. The vast majority of the Muslims also believe that jihadist actions do more harm than good, creating public disorder and provoking government crackdown on innocents. This has resulted in increasing alienation of the jihadist movement within the Muslim world itself. Moreover, the jihadists offer no real positive alternative apart from their violent methods and promise of an empty utopia.

### **The Arab spring**

The Arab Spring is also being seen as a severe setback for the jihadist movement as it makes both its ideology and the tactics irrelevant. Ever since Bin Laden declared jihad, the jihadists have employed violent means including suicide bombings to get what they call the apostate Muslim regimes replaced. But as the Middle East uprisings demonstrated, such objectives could be achieved without bombings or killing. [Largely] peaceful protests producing political change suggests an alternative model for the vast majority of the Muslims who do not approve of the violence in the first place.

### **Beginning of the End?**

The outcome is obvious. First, the jihadist enterprise is on a downward slide and ultimately would face defeat as we continue the offensive; exploiting the contradictions in its ideology, lack of a coherent strategy and severe tactical errors involving the killings of innocents irrespective of religious affiliation. This is similar to the way communism collapsed due to inherent contradictions not only in the narrative of the ideology, but also because of what it eventually produced - a "new class" instead of a classless society, the members of which were "more equal than others."

Second, even though our initial overreaction, a wrong characterization of the adversary and the obsession to demonstrate rapid-fire successes produced some unwelcome consequences, our fight against the jihadist threat appears to be on track, has begun to yield results and we are increasingly getting back in control. This would not mean the complete end of terrorism, but the risk of terrorism is reduced to such an extent that it does not create existential anxiety and provoke overreaction, which has clearly been counter-productive.

Thus, ten years after 9/11, we could very well be witnessing the beginning of the end – of the jihadist movement.