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[Home](#) > THE PRAIRIE FIRE OF JIHADI TERRORISM

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New Delhi, Kolkata, Karachi, Tunisia, Gandhinagar, Yemen, Kuwait, Bali and now Moscow---is there a prairie fire of jihadi terrorism spreading across the world? One year after the start of the USA's Operation Enduring Freedom, are the US and the rest of the world even dimly aware of the nature of Osama Bin Laden's International Islamic Front and the seriousness of the threat posed to millions of innocent civilians by the irrational dregs of the second Afghan war? Is the international community anywhere near finding an effective response to the scourge of religious terrorism? Are countries like India, China, Russia, the Central Asian Republics (CARs), Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, which face problems of extremism/terrorism in their territory, wise in uncritically accepting the US perceptions of the threat and identifying themselves with the manner in which the US has been carrying on the so-called war against terrorism in the name of the international community without consulting the members of the community as to how the fight against terrorism has to be waged?

2. These questions ought to come to one's mind as one analyses the reports of the Chechen terrorist strike in a Moscow theatre on October 23, 2002. The picture is still not clear. Media reports say that Chechen gunmen are holding about 500 people [some reports put the number at 700] hostage in a Moscow theatre after having released women, children and non-Russians. Valery Gribakin, a spokesman for the Moscow police, has been quoted as saying that between 40 and 50 gunmen were inside the building, and have demanded that the Russian troops leave the breakaway republic of Chechnya. A French diplomat, who was among the spectators and was released, has told the media that all the hostage takers were clad in camouflage fatigues and that the 'women among them were more fierce than men. According to the information posted on www.kavkaz.org ^[1] hosted by the rebels, the theatre has been captured by a suicide squad led by Movsar Barayev, described as the nephew of recently killed Chechen warlord Arbi Barayev. The web site also reported that 40 widows of Mujahids were part of the suicide squad.

3. Before commenting on the developments in Moscow, it would be in order to draw attention to some of my past observations on "Op Enduring Freedom" as they would have relevance to the questions posed above. In an article titled "WILL TERRORISTS HAVE THE LAST LAUGH?" published on September 27, 2001, I had stated as follows: "Will the terrorists of the world have the last laugh? That should be the disturbing question in everyone's mind as Mr. George Bush, the US President, and his aides mishandle their much-trumpeted "war" against terrorism, which seems to have lost its direction, momentum and credibility even before it began. Counter-terrorism strikes should be felt and not seen. They are delivered in stealth and not before TV cameras. One doesn't go to a "war" against terrorism with the bagpipers playing Col. Boogey's March and thousands of patriotic citizens waving the US flag as an armada sets sail. In an effective counter-terrorism campaign, one thinks unconventionally, plans unconventionally and strikes unconventionally---while all the time having one's feet firmly on the ground. One avoids bombast and rhetoric and focuses on action based on ground realities. Lack of professionalism has been the defining characteristic of the "war" so far." (<http://www.saag.org/papers4/paper330.html>)

4. In another article titled "ENDURING FREEDOM OR ENDURING TERRORISM?" published on October 10, 2001, I had further stated as follows: "The present "war" as being waged by the US and the UK is unlikely to see the end of international terrorism fed by religious fanaticism. It will, most probably, be the beginning of a new and more virulent form of punishment terrorism of the kind witnessed on September 11. No country, having a sizable Muslim population, and no economy would be safe from its debilitating impact." (<http://www.saag.org/papers4/paper336.html>)

5. In a subsequent article of January 30, 2002, titled "NEW CROP OF AFGHAN-RETURNEES", I had drawn attention to the dangers from the terrorists from different countries fleeing Afghanistan in the following words: "The Afghan war of the 1980s against the Soviet troops gave birth to what came to be known as a crop of Afghan returnees---mainly Arabs, Pakistanis and others, who had fought in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, they spread to other countries in the Islamic as well as the non-Islamic world and created havoc through acts of terrorism. The present US-led war against terrorism in Afghanistan has given birth to a new crop of Afghan returnees....The old wave of international terrorism, which culminated in the terrorist strikes of September 11, 2001, in the US came largely from this first crop of Afghan returnees. A new wave of international terrorism, of which the attack on the Indian Parliament (December 13, 2001), the attack on the security personnel outside the American Information Centre in Kolkata (January 22, 2002) and the kidnapping of the WSJ journalist

(January 23, 2002) are the beginning, would largely come from this second and new crop of Afghan returnees. The international coalition against terrorism has to closely monitor and neutralise the activities of the new crop." (<http://www.saag.org/papers5/paper402.html>)

6. As the survivors of the US air strikes manage to return to their countries of origin or find their way to new theatres of jihad, they have been hitting out at soft targets in order to demonstrate to the world and their followers that they are still alive and kicking and that their motivation remains as strong as ever. The motivation for the strikes at different places has not been the same. In India, Pakistan, Tunisia, Yemen, Kuwait and Bali, it was the desire to punish which has been the motivating factor. It was punishment terrorism pure and simple, without any strategic objective. The Moscow strike is an attempt by the terrorist organisation concerned to take advantage of the anger over the Russian co-operation with the US in Afghanistan and the casualties suffered by the Chechens, many of whom were ruthlessly massacred at Kunduz, to step up the struggle for the achievement of their strategic objective of an independent Chechnya.

7. By attributing each and every terrorist incident to Al Qaeda, Western, particularly US, analysts are failing to understand the real nature of the new threat confronting the international community. The new threat is more from the members of the constituent units of the International Islamic Front than from Al Qaeda. This Front, which came into existence in 1998 under the leadership of bin Laden, consists of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, five organisations of Pakistan, and the rest from Egypt, the Central Asian Republics, China (Xinjiang), and the Philippines (the Abu Sayyaf).

8. It was this Front which was helping the Taliban in its fight against the Northern Alliance before 9/11 and which fought against the US and British troops and the Northern Alliance after 9/11. A large number of terrorists from other countries too such as those of South-East Asia and Chechnya in Russia joined the International Islamic Front's jihad. While the Filipinos fought under the banner of the Abu Sayyaf, those from the other countries of South-East Asia and Chechnya and Dagestan fought under the banner of different Pakistani organisations, which are members of the International Islamic Front. They went to Pakistan in their individual capacity, got trained in the madrasas there and joined the Pakistani organisations in order to get jihadi inoculation in the battle-fields of Afghanistan. Similarly, the small number of Afro-Americans and others from the USA and West Europe fought under the banner of the Pakistani organisations or the Taliban. None of them fought under the banner of Al Qaeda because bin Laden for reasons of his personal security did not admit non-Arabs into Al Qaeda. Instructors from Al Qaeda trained them, but made them fight as members of the other constituents of the International Islamic Front and not of Al Qaeda.

9. As these dregs find their way back to their countries of origin, they would join the indigenous terrorist organisations and give their jihad a domestic dimension, directing their anger against their governments. This is what happened in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and in Chechnya when the dregs of the first Afghan war of the 1980s returned to their countries. They turned the prowess acquired by them in Afghanistan against their own Governments and started a domestic jihad in the name of Islam. The world saw a prairie fire of Afghanistan-originated jihad in different countries. The fire was put out in Egypt and Tunisia, but is still burning in Algeria and Chechnya.

10. The anger against the US and Israel is a common thread uniting all these organisations, but there are also other influences operating on them arising from purely domestic factors. A new aggravating factor is their anger at their Governments for co-operating with the US in its

so-called war against terrorism.

11. Religious terrorists tend to be extremely irrational. In the way counter-terrorism operations are conducted by Governments and projected to the public, one has to be careful not to add to their irrationality. The campaign and the multilateral co-operation have to be more covert than overt, avoiding the high profile, the spectacular and rhetoric and bombast. The ill-advised rhetoric and bombast from Washington DC and the reliance more on spectacular military operations than on unpublicised covert actions have been acting as the red rag to the terrorist bull, adding to their irrationality.

12. In fighting against this fire, each affected country has to take into account the local circumstances and sensitivities and avoid being bulldozed by the US, as it has been trying to do in Indonesia, into adopting a counter-terrorism response, which may suit the US interests, but not those of the countries of the region.

13. All countries facing the scourge of jihadi terrorism have to fight the evil according to their own genius, with the help of intelligence and legal assistance from the other members of the international community, including the US. The USA cannot win this war for them. They have to win it by their own thinking and action. Unfortunately since the so-called war against terrorism started, all countries affected by this cancer, whether India, Russia, China or those of South-East Asia, have been hoping that they can ride to victory on the shoulders of the US. They cannot. On the contrary, domestic perceptions of an undue dependence on the US and undue deference to the US-dictated counter-terrorism requirements could aggravate the problem.

14. That's the message loud and clear from Moscow.

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Category:

Papers [3]

Topics:

Technology [4]

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