

2007: A Global Assessment of the Confrontation

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Saturday, 29 December 2007

By Walid Phares

The conflict we call the War on Terror still continues at the end of 2007 and all indications are that its battlefields are expected to spread further, and escalate, in the upcoming year.

The following is a global assessment of the confrontation that has taken place since 2001, though the systematic war waged by the Jihadi forces against democracies and the free world began at least a decade before 9/11. This evaluation isn't comprehensive or definitive, but a collection of observations related to major benchmarks, directions and projections.

Global cohesion lacking

The main powers and allies involved in the War on Terror still lack global cohesion. While the US integrates its efforts in the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with its efforts globally to defeat al Qaeda and contain nuclear proliferation of rogue regimes like Iran, other powers and blocs of countries have different outlooks and plans. While Britain and other U.S partners in Europe espouse common views on the global scale, France, Germany, Spain and Italy agree on the Afghan theater but still are uninvolved in the Iraqi theater. All Atlantic partners, however, pursue al Qaeda and consider it -- along with other Salafi networks -- as the principal threat. Also, most Western partners perceive the Iranian threat as serious, although differ in the ways in which to respond.

Non-Western powers fighting Jihadist forces do not necessarily unite in the international arena against a common foe. India is targeted by Islamists but doesn't associate with the US-led efforts in the Middle East. Russia is also at war with Jihadi terror, yet it distances itself from the Afghan theater, opposes the US in Iraq, and worse, backs the two terror-spreading regimes in Tehran and Damascus.

In the region, Western-inclined governments claim they fight "terrorism" but only the terrorists who threaten their own regimes, not the worldwide Jihadi threat. The current Turkish government fights the terrorist-coined PKK, but isn't concerned with the growth of Wahhabism and Khomeinism in the region. Saudi Arabia dismantles al Qaeda cells inside the Kingdom but still spreads fundamentalism worldwide. Qatar hosts the largest US base in the region, and at the same time funds the most notorious indoctrination programs on al Jazeera. In short, there are several "wars" on terror worldwide. Surely America is leading the widest campaign, but efforts around the globe are still dispersed, uncoordinated, and in many cases, contradictory.

Afghanistan

Many critics asserted in 2007 that the Taliban were returning and that NATO wasn't providing full stability yet. In my assessment, this is a long war: the neo-Taliban weren't able to achieve full enclave control anywhere in the country. The government of Mr. Karzai should take advantage of international backing to achieve a breakthrough in the counter-ideology campaign, because the US-led mission will be successful as long as it provides space and time for Kabul to win the war of ideas. Efforts in 2008 must focus on coordination with Pakistan against the Jihadists, and on civil society political gains.

Pakistan

Finally, General Musharraf's government widened its military offensives during 2007 in the neo-Taliban zones, prompting terror counter strikes in various cities and a major Jihadi uprising in Islamabad. The escalation opened a window among political opposition to make gains against Musharraf. By the year's end, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif came back to the country and were leading the opposition in the next elections. The assassination of Bhutto was a setback to the political process. Musharraf and the secular forces need to coalesce around a platform of national security and democracy and move forward with elections and anti-Terror campaign in 2008. But for international security, the priority is to preserve Pakistan's nuclear assets and keep the Jihadists at bay. Will secular opposition and the President understand this higher national priority in 2008?

Somalia

An important, but still temporary, victory was scored in Somalia against the Islamist Mahakem, the Taliban of the Horn of

Africa, and it took Western support to the Somali Government and an Ethiopian intervention to accomplish it. Denying a state sanctuary to al Qaeda in Africa is a plus, but the future will depend on Bin Laden's advances or defeats across the African continent in 2008.

Sudan

The main international concern in Africa is undoubtedly toward Darfur. The Sudanese regime was able in 2007 to stall Western intervention for one whole year, allowing the Janjaweed to strengthen and perform additional atrocities. Playing the Arab League and the African Union roles to delay a UN action, Khartoum is battling African resistance movements on two fronts: Darfur, but also the south. The regime, similar to other Jihadi powers in the region, is gaining time to crumble its previous commitments and unleash counter campaigns. The international campaign in Darfur must begin in 2008, otherwise the Jihadi counter offensive in Africa will strike deep in Chad and across the Saharan countries by early 2009.

North Africa

Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian counter terrorism efforts increased in 2007 but so did Terror attacks by al Qaeda in the Maghreb. The North African battlefield is now wide open after the combat Salafists have joined Bin Laden officially. U.S and European support need to target the Sahara region as a whole from Mauritania to Chad in 2008 before it slips to the Jihadi forces. If al Qaeda entrenches itself in the area, West Africa will be threatened by 2009.

Iraq

The surge by US forces and allies has worked and al Qaeda plans have been impacted and delayed in 2007. The goals of the combined enemies of Iraqi democracy (al Qaeda and the Syrian and Iranian regimes) were to crumble the Coalition's role and to interdict the rise of a Government in the country. US military action eliminated al Qaeda's attempts to create enclaves. The rise of Sunni Tribes against the Terror groups in the center is a major development in the Iraq Theater. Furthermore, the rise of Shia tribes in the south against Iranian influence and in solidarity with the central Sunni tribes is the beginning of a strategic shift in the country. However the persistence of Damascus and Tehran in supporting Terror forces can eventually reverse these advances. Hence, during 2008, it is important for the US-led Coalition to counter the moves by the Iranian and Syrian regimes in Iraq and set up a national Iraqi capacity to deter the Pasdaran activities.

Iran

On the negative side, confusing messages issued by US Congressional leaders regarding a so-called "dialogue" with the Iranian regime during 2007 weakened the US containment strategy and harmed efforts by the Iranian opposition. Furthermore the American NIE findings during the Fall of this year gave Tehran's Mullahs additional room to maneuver. On the positive side, the sanctions issued by the US president against the Pasdaran and the Quds force reverberated throughout the country, encouraging an escalation by the opposition inside the country. President Sarkozy's strong attitude reinforced the Western coalition against nuclear weapons sought by the Khomeinists. However if by end of 2008, no further containment is achieved, by 2009, the (Iranian-Syrian) "axis" will be achieving a regional offensive. It is advisable that significant efforts to support Iran's civil society uprising during 2008.

Syria

During 2007 the Syrian regime continued to back Terror activities in Iraq, Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories without significant responses from the international community. In Lebanon, the Assad regime was successful in weakening the Government and the Cedars revolution to a tipping point. In Gaza, it backed Hamas coup along with Iran. And it was able to dodge the Hariri international tribunal for one more year. Furthermore Damascus continued to strengthen its missile capabilities and programs of weapons of mass destruction. As for Iran, if no serious containment strategy is applied to the Assad regime as of 2008, by the following year a domino effect would be taking place in the region against the rise of democracies with Syria playing a significant role. During the present year both US Congress political messaging towards "dialogue" and the Russian backing encouraged Assad to pursue his policies and created harsher conditions for the Syrian opposition.

Lebanon

The year 2007 witnessed a series of tragedies with terror assassinations directed against legislators from the majority in Parliament and a senior general in the Lebanese Army. Hezbollah and its allies were successful in intimidating the Government and the Cedars Revolution with violence and threats. The United States public position stayed the course in support to the democracy movement while French initiatives further confused the Lebanese. In 2008 the fate of Lebanon will be centered on the election of a new President. The US, the European Union and their allies in the region have about 9 months to back free Lebanon, otherwise the following year could witness the fall of the country back into the hands of the "axis."

Turkey

The inevitable dragging of the Turkish Army in incursions against the PKK in northern Iraq during 2007 indirectly serves the interests of the Syro-Iranian "axis." It also deflects the attention from the ideological change performed by the Islamist Government in Ankara.

Saudi Arabia

During 2007, the Saudi Kingdom continued its efforts against the al Qaeda cells inside the country. It developed additional tactics to wage theological pressures on the organization. But at the same time, Saudi funds were still made available to fundamentalists around the world.

Russia

Although Russia continues to be a main target to Wahhabi and Jihadist terror and incitement, ironically, the Putin government during 2007 staged three moves to the advantage of terror regimes: opposing the US missile defense system in Europe, meant to protect Europe from the Khomeinist threat; shielding Tehran from Western pressures; and protecting the Assad regime. In 2008, the current direction taken by the Kremlin should be addressed seriously by the US and Europe through a historic and open dialogue on the future of Terrorism. Russia's current policies, if not corrected, can backfire against its own national security in view of the Jihadist rising activities in Chechnya and the Caucasus as well as in central Asia.

India

India continued to be targeted by the Jihadists in 2007. As a nuclear power, and the largest democracy in the world, this country should be further included in the international coalition against Terror and granted a more important role in south Asia in 2008.

China

During 2007, Chinese technology and weapons continued to flow to Terrorism-supporting regimes including Sudan, Iran and Syria. As for Russia, China's own security within its own borders can be affected by a growing Jihadi network in its north Western provinces.

France

The election of Nicholas Sarkozy in 2007 is a positive development as the new President intends to increase French participation in the War against Terrorism. Continuous incitements by Jihadists networks against France also escalated projecting forthcoming confrontations in France.

Europe and the West

Developments and arrests made in Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium in 2007 all indicate that Jihadi warfare in Western Europe is to be expected in 2008 and beyond. Similar trends were detected in Australia and Canada during the same year

The United States

During 2007 several arrests and dismantling of cells within the United States demonstrated the spread of the Jihadi networks at various levels and in different areas. A Projection of these developments and of the type of infiltrations already in place in this country shows that the map of the Jihadi web is much wider and deeper than anticipated, even by Government agencies and estimates. The diverse nature of the Jihadi activities in America lead me to believe that the next waves will be more sophisticated and better inserted in the institutions and society. The 2007 arrests and reports show that the Jihadists had interest in penetrating the US defense system.

However another type of threat has also appeared: the Jihadi ideological penetration of various spheres of education and decision-making, including at the strategic level. Both Wahabi and Khomeinist funding and influence have been spotted in 2007. The US Congress and the Administration should be spending time and efforts during 2008 to develop a national consensus on the definition of the threat doctrine, Jihadism. Short of achieving a minimal understanding of the Terror ideology, 2009 and beyond will witness a faster mutation of the Jihadi threat inside the country.

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