

Adrian Guelke

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Report

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Redefining the Global War on Terror?

Adrian Guelke is Professor of Comparative Politics and director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy at Queen's University, Belfast. Recent publications include *The New Age of Terrorism* (IB Tauris, 2009) and *Terrorism and Global Disorder* (IB Tauris, 2006).

At the heart of the fresh approach to foreign policy promised by President Barack Obama was the repudiation of his predecessor's approach on the issue that had dominated the administration's rhetoric after 9/11, the global war on terror. Thus, one of the principal themes of Obama's campaign for the presidency had been that the threat posed by al Qaeda to the United States did not necessitate or justify the previous administration's departure from America's commitment to uphold basic international norms on torture and the treatment of prisoners. He repeated his commitment to a change of course in his inaugural address in which he stated: 'we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals'. Further, on his very first day in office, he issued four executive orders that represented a clear break with the policies of the Bush Administration. The operation of military tribunals at Guantánamo Bay was suspended, while the new administration undertook to close the detention facility itself within a year. Torture was outlawed in an order headed 'ensuring legal interrogation'. The same order required the closure of the secret prisons that had been operated by the CIA. Another order set up a wide-ranging review of detention policies introduced to meet the threat of terrorism.

And to underline still further the change in approach, the very term, global war on terror, fell out of use. Thus, Vice President Biden's major speech on foreign policy in Munich in February made no reference to GWOT or even a war on terrorism. In March, the administration came up with alternative language to describe America's engagement in two wars as a result of decisions that the Bush Administration had made after 9/11. As various news outlets revealed, a memorandum circulated within the administration in March recommended use of the term, overseas contingency operations, in place of GWOT. These changes prompted a strong reaction from a leading figure in the Bush Administration, former Vice President Dick Cheney. He accused the Obama Administration of jeopardising the security of the United States and running the risk of another attack like that of 9/11. He complained that Obama's policies amounted to returning to the law enforcement mode of fighting terrorism, which he saw as inadequate to meeting the threat posed by al Qaeda to America.

In terms of a spectrum of counter-terrorist approaches, the law enforcement mode, which can be labelled more simply as criminalisation, occupies a middle point in the spectrum with suppression and accommodation at its opposite ends. The term, suppression, can be used to describe the 'no holds barred' approach that relies on military action and the suspension of the normal legal safeguards for suspects in its treatment of detainees. By contrast, at the opposite end of the spectrum, accommodation involves tackling terrorism by addressing the grievances seen to motivate and to sustain the resort to political violence; i.e. in terms of the metaphor of the guerrilla as a fish in water, draining the swamp

to deprive terrorists of willing recruits. Each of the approaches has limitations. Suppression is commonly faulted as leading to actions that are disproportionate and indiscriminate in their impact. Criminalisation tends to be criticised as a strategy of containment that relies on the legal system to punish perpetrators after the event. Accommodation may be seen as appeasement and in its assumption that legitimate grievances are at the root of terrorism it can be regarded as encouraging any group with a grievance to resort to violence. Also the solutions offered under the rubric of accommodation tend to be long term in nature and so do not in any event offer an answer to imminent threats.

While a particular government may rely predominantly on one of these approaches, in practice, even governments that are committed to suppression, for example, may acknowledge from time to time the relevance of dealing with the underlying conditions that give rise to support for organisations engaged in terrorism. Thus, periodically during his tenure in the White House, George W. Bush mused on the connection between poverty and terrorism and acknowledged the relevance of measures designed to counter extremism though altering the social conditions in which it thrived. Similarly, the sharp break with the policies of his predecessor that Barack Obama established at the outset of his presidency has been followed through, though by no means entirely consistently. Thus, Obama not merely persisted with the predator drone programme that killed large numbers of innocent bystanders in its efforts to assassinate particular individuals in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but stepped up the attacks. The inconsistencies are partly a product of the pursuit of diverse objectives that have sometimes proved conflicting, but they have also partly been a product of the administration's response to events.

By emphasising due process and the rule of law, President Obama sought to restore America's reputation after the damage done by reports on conditions at Camp Delta at Guantánamo Bay and the pictures that had come out of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. He also took initiatives to give a larger role to diplomacy and negotiations in the conduct of American foreign policy as a further departure from the unilateralism of the Bush Administration and its single-minded reliance on military force to secure its objectives that had so alienated America's allies. Most notable in this respect was the speech that Obama gave in Cairo in June.

In it he called for the ending of the cycle of distrust that had arisen between America and Islam. He declared: 'I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based on mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based on the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive; and need not be in competition'. He underscored the need for 'violent extremism

in all its forms' to be confronted and in this context defended the American mission in Afghanistan. At the same time, he emphasised that American action to defend itself should be 'respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law'. He also spoke eloquently of the need for a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And he signalled his readiness to engage in negotiations with Iran 'without preconditions and on the basis of mutual respect'.

But Obama's capacity to move forward on any aspect of the agenda he set out in Cairo proved very limited in practice. Opposition to his objectives from the parties to the conflicts played a part in his difficulties, but events in the second half of 2009 also helped to make a mockery of his hopes. Paradoxically, Bush's lack of interest in negotiated settlements had left regional powers free to explore the possibilities for progress in dialogue with their adversaries without the fear that America would seek to influence the outcome. The assumption that Obama would give priority to negotiations over the use of force gave governments facing insurgents the incentive to pre-empt the pressures for negotiated deals by taking military action to shift the balance of power in their favour, as Israel sought to do in Gaza and as Sri Lanka did with greater success in its conflict with Tamils nationalists.

Flawed elections in Iran and Afghanistan undermined the immediate relevance of diplomacy in either case. The suspect counting of votes in Iran ruled out dialogue with the regime in Tehran, in view of its evident lack of legitimacy in the aftermath of the elections. By contrast, Karzai's weakness as a result of his regime's involvement in widespread electoral malpractice and the increased possibility that it might succumb without external support to a resurgent Taliban pushed Obama into accepting the option of shoring up the regime through the dispatch of a further 30,000 American troops. This was after lengthy debate in Washington on the request of General McChrystal for a substantial increase of forces to counter the Taliban, debate prompted in part by the war's growing unpopularity both because of the scale of American casualties and the reputation of

the Karzai government. To justify his decision President Obama adopted rhetoric scarcely less reductionist than that of his predecessor. He spoke of Afghanistan and Pakistan as the epicentre of violent extremism posing a direct threat to the United States itself and linked the mission in Afghanistan explicitly to the objective of destroying al Qaeda.

To add to Obama's difficulties, two events occurred that provided further ammunition for rightwing critics of his approach to the threat of terrorism. The first was a shooting at an army base in Texas. On 5 November, Major Nidal Malik Hasan opened fire on soldiers awaiting medical examinations. He killed 13 people and injured 30 others. The attack resembled previous 'lone wolf' murders, such as the massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007 or the attack on an Amish school in 2006. But there was one significant difference. On the basis of his crying out 'God is great' and the subsequent uncovering of jihadist influences on his life, he was judged to be more politically than personally motivated, prompting descriptions in the media of his behaviour as not merely an act of terrorism, but a frightening new form of terrorism. It thus became possible for this event to be represented as an indication of the country's vulnerability to international terrorism rather than as another example of the threat posed to the American public by psychotic individuals due to the country's lax supervision of firearms.

The Fort Hood shootings were followed by the attempt on Christmas Day of a Nigerian passenger to down a Detroit-bound jet by detonating explosives he had smuggled on board. The failed attempt bore a close resemblance to that of Richard Reid, the shoe-bomber who attempted a similar feat at the end of December 2001 on a transatlantic flight bound for Miami. But as more details emerged about Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab's

Yemeni connections, as well as the existence of previous warnings about his activities, critics seized on the administration's initially relatively relaxed reaction to the episode to attack Obama's approach to combating terrorism, with Cheney accusing him of pretending the country was not at war. The critics were assisted by alarmist media coverage that sought to make the most of a story in a quiet period for news.

What Obama's first year in office underscores is the difficulty for any administration radically to change a country's foreign policy. The results of his efforts bear out the well-established realist proposition of continuity in foreign policy, though it might be more fashionable to make the same point in terms of the theory of path dependency. However, it might also be argued that the expectations of radical change were always misplaced, considering that Obama campaigned for the presidency as a centrist. Admittedly, Obama's Cairo speech hinted at more radical possibilities than would have seemed conceivable under any of the other serious candidates for the presidency in 2008. But the members of the committee who awarded Obama the Nobel Peace Prize on the strength of Cairo and some of his other speeches did him no favours.

The reward for their presumption was an acceptance speech that showed no willingness to challenge the American mainstream, portraying America as a selfless force for good in virtually all of its dealings with the outside world over the years. His only somewhat double-edged concession to critics of American foreign policy was to acknowledge that when America acted in an arbitrary fashion it 'undercut the legitimacy of future interventions'. To label Barack Obama 'George W. Obama', as some bloggers have done, goes too far. But whether in practice Obama is able to make a great deal of difference to American foreign policy in 2010 will depend on a much more favourable set of circumstances than he was presented with in 2009. ■