

Moving on from the 'War on Terror'

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Ten years have passed since the tragic events of September 11th 2001. Over 3,000 people died in the brazen assault on New York's Twin Towers. Lives were shattered, families torn asunder and a nation lay shocked in the debris of that day. Within twenty-four hours President Bush had declared a 'war on terror'. With the underlying threat implicit in his words 'you are either with us or against us', the US government rapidly put pressure on countries to declare their support for the USA. It was clear already at this early stage that this was not going to be a quick operation, a side-line activity to be undertaken by the usual set of security agencies such as the CIA, special forces, FBI and military. As Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State said, "It isn't going to be solved with a single counter-attack against one individual, it's going to be a long term conflict."



Not only has it been a long term conflict, but it has also become a 'whole-of-government' enterprise, affecting all aspects of governance from aid policy to education, the penal system, immigration, legislation and so on at both national and global levels. US determination to destroy Al Qaeda has pressured countries into amending or creating new counter-terrorist legislation, improving counter-terrorist strategies, tightening up their systems of financial governance, contributing troops, resources and information in the military expeditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and enhancing their surveillance of suspect individuals, organisations and communities. Aid policy has become increasingly intertwined with security objectives. Aid flows to front-line states such as Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq spiralled; support to curriculum reform in madrassas increased; educational aid budgets for Muslim-majority countries rose; the military engaged more determinedly in humanitarian intervention, believing that soft tactics of 'hearts and minds' would win over reluctant populations. On the home front, social policy became entangled in the web of security as community cohesion became an arena for preventing extremism and radicalisation.

But these 'whole-of-government' counter-terrorist strategies have come at a cost. Muslim communities have been disproportionately targeted, and are more likely to be stopped by police, searched at airports, and generally treated with suspicion. As Mehdi Hasan wrote recently in the Guardian, this has led in the UK to a 'chilling of speech inside Muslim communities'. Charities, too, are now seen through the prism of counter-terrorism. In the UK the 2006 Home Office and Treasury report on charities and terrorism urged charities to check their partners against designated lists of terrorist organisations and people. NGOs receiving funds from USAID are required to sign an Anti-Terrorist Certificate, stating that their organisation and staff have no association whatsoever with terrorism. Special Recommendation VIII, issued by the Financial Action Taskforce in the wake of 9/11, stated that charities were particularly vulnerable to terrorist abuse and required them to be subject to global anti-money laundering measures. Whilst non-profits in the USA complained vociferously about the additional administrative burdens placed on them, those NGOs working overseas expressed concern at the impact of new counter-terrorist measures on sustaining and building relations of trust with their partners. Humanitarian agencies in particular lamented the military thrust into development. Not only was it blurring the boundaries between the military and civil, but it was also increasingly endangering the lives of aid workers and undermining their foundational claims to neutrality, independence and impartiality.

Understandably world attention has focussed in the last week on the damage to people's lives as a result of the Twin Tower bombings. Questions have been asked about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Was it right to invade Iraq when the evidence of any involvement in the 9/11 attacks was so spurious? Was it right to invade Afghanistan, a country already devastated by decades of war and riven with poverty? Is the world any safer today? But it is time to move on from this and ask more fundamental questions about the effectiveness and costs of the legal, institutional and policy edifice that has been built up over the last decade to make us all safer. Is it not time we began to debate

repealing the Patriot Act, amending the UK Terrorist Act, undoing the need for NGOs and charities to vet their partners, delinking aid from security priorities, and social policy from counter-terrorism needs. Or, has the `extraordinary' become so commonplace that we can no longer see its insidious effects on so many arenas of life?

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