

Democracy, Terrorism and the Middle East

By Chris Forster, The Foreign Policy Centre

Can democracy stop terrorism? In George Bush's State of the Union address he reiterated his Administration's policy that Americans had to support democratic efforts in the Middle East as the best means to securing peace and defeating organisations such as al-Qaeda. Yet questions are already arising as to whether this is proving to be the most appropriate course of action.

In any Middle Eastern state that has pretensions towards democracy Islamist groups are dominating the political field. The most spectacular example was Hamas' victory with 56 per cent of the vote over Fatah, the secular party that had governed in Palestine for the last thirty years. In Egypt's recent elections the Muslim Brotherhood put up independent candidates and consequently won 20 per cent of parliamentary seats. They would have won more if rumours are true of a deal made with President Mubarak that restricted them. Iraq's most recent elections, heralded as a triumph for democracy, saw not the secular, non-sectarian and multiethnic party of former interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi claim dominance. Instead 81 per cent of Arabs elected were campaigners from sectarian and Islamist lists. Allawi saw just nine per cent of the vote.

With the rise of Islamist parties some are doubting that democratisation will bring the security that the US is looking for. The views that these parties represent are often overtly hostile to US ambitions in the region, or simply to America itself. Hamas, for example, has refused to recognise Israel. For foreign policy analysts dubious of Bush's democratisation drive, this is evidence that the US's immediate security and foreign policy agenda is being jeopardised. F. Gregory Gause III in a Foreign Affairs article has noted that there is in fact little data to support the notion that democracies directly diminish the prospect of terrorism.

Citing the survival of ETA after Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy, the IRA in the UK, one of the oldest democracies, terrorist attacks in India, the world's largest democracy, the Red Army Faction in West Germany and the Oklahoma City bomber, Gause attempts to demonstrate that democracies are equally susceptible to terrorism. State Department statistics from the 'Patterns of Global Terrorism' report show that between 2000 and 2003 more terrorist activity had in fact taken place in 'free' countries compared to 'partly free' or 'not free' ones. China is also mentioned as an authoritarian state that had no incidence of terrorism at all.

Yet the biggest and most notorious examples are Iraq and Afghanistan where the first stages of Bush's policy to spread democracy have already taken place. Both countries in recent times have held elections under the supervision of international actors. Yet both have still suffered terrorist attacks since. It seems, as Gause says, 'that democratisation did little to discourage terrorists from operating there'.

The problem here is that 'democracy' is assumed to be a simplified construction and 'terrorism' a single entity. Democracy is incredibly complex, taking hundreds of years to evolve in some countries. The vast spectrum of terrorism that exists in the world and the variety of terrorists that operate across it mean that no single solution, no one transformation is likely to neutralise the threat.

The IRA fought for a cause based on perceived historical and political grievances, aggravated by social ones. The fight remained domestic, contained within the sphere of British politics, despite money and mediators from the US. Since the

incorporation of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, into the political process in Northern Ireland disarmament and peace have been greatly successful. ETA, in its own domestic and localised campaign, has diminished as a force since the death of Franco in 1975 and more recently with greater autonomy granted to the regions. Popularity of the terrorist group is at its lowest ebb for decades, due to a combination of depleted support and the devastating attack perpetrated by al-Qaeda in Madrid on 3/11.

Yet the IRA and ETA are from a completely different branch of terrorism compared to organisations such as al-Qaeda. The former were restrained within national fields of vision, had realistic (if not popular) political ambitions and often gave warning of imminent attacks. Whereas the latter is blind to national borders, demands the impossible imposition of a world caliphate based on *sharia* law and never gives any advanced notice of its activities. In between groups such as the IRA and al-Qaeda are those with a mixture of these characteristics. Hamas's cause, for example, has crossed boundaries expanding from a Palestinian to a Muslim one. Yet its primary ambitions remained somewhat realistic, demoting the importance of destroying the state of Israel to promoting the creation of their own state.

Clouding this distinction is a language constraint hindering our understanding of these organisations. The only aspect that links terrorist groups, in some respects, is the fact that they have employed terror as a tool to further their ambitions. Otherwise, they are really quite distinct entities. It is like comparing Starbucks to Saatchi & Saatchi. You cannot simply note that they are both 'businesses' trying to make a profit. Their structure, aims, employees, target audience and internal philosophies are markedly different. Similarly with terrorist organisations, the hierarchical, army-based structure of the IRA is very different to that of the individualised and autonomous cells that sustain al-Qaeda.

Creating the label of 'terrorist' can lead people to fall into a similar trap. Personal motivations vary enormously. To prevent people from believing in groups that employ terrorism, to prevent them from adopting their methods and beliefs, understanding that is crucial. Has the terrorist chosen this path because familial destitution and a lack of economic opportunity have fostered hatred for the perceived perpetrators? Has a profound spiritual belief been twisted and combined with a feeling of social exclusion? Perhaps a lack of political voice has stirred activism amongst an excluded minority? More than likely there is a complicated mixture of these motivations, further influenced by local culture, personal experience, national history and government influence. In any case, there is no singular 'terrorist', no one way to 'drain the swamp' of support for terrorist organisations.

Yet the overriding approach for dealing with organisations that employ terrorism and the terrorists that join them should be one of democratisation of the countries that sustain them. Providing non-violent and viable means for people to express grievances, giving space for economic prosperity and creating the structures for social stability are all possible within the realms of democracies because the people can inform the government of what is needed. If it fails, it gets voted out. Furthermore, with stateless groups, such as al-Qaeda, where you cannot easily democratise those within the structure, it is better to whittle down the number of countries they can operate from by spreading democracy. What 'democratisation' means in practice, however, is particularly complicated, for 'democracy' itself is not a one dimensional creature.

Superficial democracies, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, are more likely to hamper security initiatives and promote supporters of violence and terrorism in volatile

regions such as the Middle East. The presence of democratic elections is simply not enough. The ballot box is only the most obvious and cosmetic symbol of a democratic regime and cannot support the consequences democracy implies. It is akin to calling the shell of a vehicle a 'car'. Only really when combined with the components inside that allow it to function will it be one. A regime that implements democratic measures will only function when buttressed by wider forces.

True modern-day democracy is therefore effective democracy. This requires a cacophony of voices to give weight in government decision-making to as many groups as possible. An important element of this is a large middle-class with a vested interest to keep an eye on government (unlike, say, subsistence farmers that must stay focussed on eking out a living). Following this, freedom of speech allows people to criticise and suggest alternative policy to government leaders. Freedom of the press provides a medium for these opinions to be aired. Freedom of association permits those of a similar disposition to lobby their cause. A mature civil society gives minority groups a stronger influence in policy. A decent education system underpins it all, fostering rational and logical debate, creating innovative solutions to problems and relieving people from the spectre of superstition and prejudice.

These are the obvious requisites for a functional democracy and are recognised as such by many in the US. The problem for some policy makers in America is that a democratically elected Arab government is unlikely to be as sympathetic and cooperative as today's authoritarian regimes. This would not be a result of fervent anti-Americanism. Polls by the Pew Global Attitudes Project and Zogby International in the last few years have shown that many Arabs support US values, such as democracy and freedom, and even believe that democracy would work in their own countries. Civil and personal rights were ranked as the most important political issues, above health, Palestine and the economy.

US policy in the region, and not what America stands for, is the major cause of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. Gause admits that it is this that 'drives the sentiment'. This strong reaction of people in the Middle East to US policies is perhaps an indication that they are the wrong ones – so the policies themselves are the problem and are what need revision. Yet it is a rather arrogant assumption that the people of these countries should be denied the virtues of democracy in order to sustain regimes that can be more easily persuaded to accept US foreign policy. If the US approach to the Middle East was applied to Europe and a similar dissatisfaction arose, it would not be difficult to fathom an overtly anti-American government being elected to Westminster.

Gause still doubts, however, that changing tactics would have any effect on public opinion and therefore also elected governments. Iran is an example where people are favourable toward the US but did not vote for the candidate that wanted rapprochement with America. The flawed logic that flows from here is that the rise of Islamic parties and groups that are anti-American is independent of US foreign policy. The assumption is, of course, that citizens of Middle Eastern countries vote on single issues and that that issue is the US. As shown earlier, they have many greater concerns, including health, corruption, education and employment. These were the main reasons that Hamas came to power, not for its dedication to destroy Israel. For similar reasons Iranians voted for President Ahmadinejad. His fiery rhetoric did not just heat nationalist pride but focussed on domestic concerns based on promises to revive the economy. Presenting himself as a common man also appealed to the people and his campaign was assisted by members of the Revolutionary Guard that supported his candidature and persuaded others to do so, too.

A second assumption is that Islamic parties are undesirable for leading governments. Instead, secular and non-sectarian parties should be favoured and supported by Western governments. But what is an Islamic party? Again, there are many hues and not all policies will necessarily revolve around the Koran. A certain hypocrisy also arises when looking at political parties outside the Middle East. What of the Christian Democrats in Germany? The Christian Union in the Netherlands? The Christian People's Party in Norway? The Bharatiya Janata Party (Hindu) and Punjab Popular Front (Sikh) in India? Even the Republican Party in the US has its influential evangelical base. All these parties try to pull on the loyalties people have with their religions; all will have their policies affected by the will of their religious voters. Why are they not received with similar caution?

In the Middle East democratically elected Islamic parties functioning within the context of a real democracy will not necessarily promote or tolerate terrorists organisations within their midst. Security and foreign policy interests will prevail in order to remain in power. Yet the promotion of nationalist, liberal, secular, right- or left-wing parties in Middle East countries should be on the Western agenda for the sake of plurality of choice. A level of competition between political visions is needed so that parties will seek to represent the views of the majority and not just provide the electorate with the choice of choosing the best of a bad bunch.

The immediate fears of Western governments should not lead to the kind of meddling in the Middle East that has led to today's world. Focus should be upon securing themselves from terrorist attacks from international organisations such as al-Qaeda. The incidents of 9/11 in New York, 3/11 in Madrid and 7/7 in London do demonstrate that democracies are still vulnerable to attack, but it does not follow that they are not suitable to defeat it. If anything, the solidarity that emerged in the wake of these attacks has shown the commitment of the citizenry to the democratic cause and exposed those supportive of terrorist methods. The Muslim community in the UK has been able, through the mechanisms existent in democracies, to voice their concern over extremists claiming to represent their faith. The peaceful rally in London against the cartoon depictions of Mohammed outnumbered the aggressive one that featured mock suicide bombers and plaques calling for the massacre and destruction of Europe. The latter were subsequently isolated with some even apologising for their actions. The former were able to mobilise the mainstream of Muslims in their protest while evoking their Britishness and condemning those tending toward violence.

Democracy, in all its shades, complexities and depths, remains the best means for any country to tackle the threat of terrorism, exported or domestic. So long as policy-makers and the public recognise that 'terrorists' and their organisations come in all shapes and sizes will progress be made in addressing and overcoming them. Teaching and not just spreading Western values on freedom will help fully functioning democracies to bloom so that people can mould their governments to suit themselves. Assisting them in the fragile and dangerous transition toward becoming true democratic regimes will be the role for those already there. The West must resist trying to direct or influence the final outcome to avoid a backlash. Allowing them to evolve with assistance will be the way to bring democracy to bear upon terrorism and bring the Middle East into the democratic age.