

Winning the War on Terrorism
Why Obama's new initiative is so dangerous to al Qaeda
by Dr. Andreas Bock

By reaching out to the Muslim community is US-President Barack Obama winning the war on terrorism? Measured by the reactions President Barack Obama's speech provoked even before it had been delivered, the answer must be yes!

As soon as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda's top leaders, knew of Obama's plan to formulate a restatement of the relationship between the USA and both Muslims and Islam, they denounced his new strategy.¹ They obviously felt threatened by Obama's plan of a "new beginning".²

In his audio message, bin Laden accused Obama "to have followed the same path taken by his predecessor [President George W. Bush, A.B.], in creating more enmity towards Muslims, and adding on to the fighting enemies, thus paving the way for new long wars". And he threatened the American people to be prepared "to continue harvesting what their White House leaders grow, in the years and decades to come."³

But, and this is remarkable, bin Laden also tried to instrumentalize the current Pakistani crisis for his global Jihad project. It was Obama's order to Pakistani President Asif Ali, bin Laden claimed,

to prevent the people of Swat from implementing the Shari'a law by fighting and killing them through bombings and destruction. This has led one million Muslims, elderly people, women and children, to flee their homes and villages and live in tents after they'd been living with dignity in their homes⁴.

Bin Laden's effort to create a new front helps to understand, why Obamas reorientation of the American foreign policy actually poses such a danger to al Qaeda. Obama's new political initiative, that not only tries to renew the relationship between Islam and the West after 9/11, but is also promising to bring the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians to a peaceful solution. And this conflict is of vital importance to the power and threat capability al Qaeda enjoys.

I will show how Obama's initiative offers a successful alternative to fight terrorism with force. He clearly realizes, that Osama bin Laden is not the problem, given the growing threat perception of an Islamic motivated international terrorism; bin Laden is just a complication. The actual problem is a growing willingness to engage in terrorist attacks – even by apparently well integrated and secular educated immigrant's children of the second generation. By addressing the Muslims and their perceived discrimination, Obama is addressing the terrorist threat directly by its roots.

Dependent on Support

Terrorism is crucially dependent on broad and, more importantly, voluntary support. That is true for such different groups or organizations as the German RAF, the ANC, the IRA, Hezbollah or al Qaeda.

¹ Mackey, Robert: "Punditry From Bin Laden and Zawahiri on Obama's Trip to the Middle East", in: The New York Times News Blog, under: thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/03/bin-laden-and-zawahiri-join-pundits-on-obama-visit/, retrieved on 11th June 2009

² Cf.: The White House: "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning", under: www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/, retrieved on 11th June 2009

³ Quoted in: "New Bin Laden Tape Blasts Obama", in: CBS News, under: www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/06/03/world/main5058482.shtml, retrieved on 11th June 2009

⁴ Ibid.

Terrorism uses violence as an instrument to manipulate the public. This is the strategic use of terroristic violence against deliberately chosen victims to influence a society or an administration. But this “support” of the terroristic group aims, achieved by the fears and horrors induced by the assault(s), is fundamentally different from the real and voluntary support of the terrorist group and its aims. The former is part of the strategic concept of the terroristic calculation – to control peoples’ decision through indiscriminate violence –, the latter is a necessary requirement for *firstly*, the terrorist group’s power and influence (to fight for its aims over a period of time) and, *secondly* and concurrently, for the terrorist group’s threat capability: the bigger the support an organization enjoys, the bigger its capability to threaten a society (or, supposed every terrorist group that labeled itself as an al Qaeda branch, is really part of the al Qaeda network, to threaten even several societies at the same time). Conversely, with decreasing support, the power, influence and, sooner or later, the threat capability of a terrorist group decreases as well.⁵

Of major importance here is the frequently ignored fact that terrorist groups are weak, despite the horrors and the fear they spread, and that they therefore are virtually dependent on broad support – that they receive from partisans in form of sympathy, money, or volunteers, or from sympathizing States, that too provide money, but also weapons, and, maybe more important, access to training facilities and so-called safe havens⁶ and give the claims of the terrorist group a voice on the international stage it otherwise lacks.

Terrorist groups are weak (and that includes explicitly al Qaeda) because they are no States. This might seem as a common-place, but is anything else but trivial. It means *firstly* that terrorist groups lack the traditional instruments States have to do politics, i.e. to achieve their aims or defend their interests using their different tools of power, e.g. through diplomacy, bargaining, threats and promises (“stick and carrot”), ultimatums, uni- and multilateral sanctions or, as an ultima ratio, war.

Terrorist groups and States are obviously not equal with regard to power politics.

Secondly, and most importantly, it means that terrorist groups have to operate underground, given that non-State violence is prima facie illegitimate violence: it is the State owning the monopoly of force.⁷ Activities planned in and carried out underground are demanding: they need and consume a lot of rare resources, like time, money, goods and manpower; and most of all, they are dangerous. Underground activities are constantly in danger of being discovered – and therefore prevented.

Therefore, as an underground organization, terrorist groups are constantly lacking resources. However, they cannot access resources as States can.; they cannot, e.g. advertise for the “job” of an assassin or a bomb engineer, establish regular trade relations to gather weapons and technology they need, or withdraw into a safe area of retreat. All of this, and here we have come full circle, depends heavily on supporters (people and States) that provide it.

⁵ As Bruno Frey notes, during the 1960s the “Front de Libération Jurassien“ fought in Switzerland with brutal attacks for the independence of the Bernese Jura. After the Swiss government agreed to one of the conditions the Front made and hold a referendum on the future of the Jura the attacks reduced immediately. However, the majority voted against the claimed independence, so the Front led off the fight again. But “they lost popular support and soon ceased to exist” (Frey, Bruno S.: *Dealing with Terrorism – Stick or Carrot?*, London 2004, p. 112)

⁶ Just remember the support the Taliban regime offered Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda: without such areas of retreat, that were safe, i.e. without real danger for bin Laden to be turned over to the USA, and hard to capture, like the mountain fortress Tora Bora, it is doubtful, whether he would still be on the loose.

⁷ Although we know an individual right of self-defense, a group based right of defense is heavily contested. The case of the ANC is exemplary: though it fought an obviously inhuman and discriminatory political system, the South African State could draw upon the basic assumptions of the UN-System, i.e. that States and not non-State groups, no matter what their aim may be, are the legitimate entities of the international system. Consequently, the USA regarded the ANC as an illegitimate terrorist organization; it took the US-Administration until June 2008 to delete Nelson Mandela from the State Department’s terror watch list.

Mobilize Support

How do terroristic groups or organizations mobilize the voluntary support, which is so vital for them? Ironically, it is the State under attack that is doing most of the work necessary, because the answer States usually give when confronted with terrorism is as simple as wrong: Violence!

After 9/11, the USA started what President Bush called a “Global War on Terror” (GWOT) – fighting the terrorist threat by military means in Afghanistan and Iraq. Two wars that both were won after a few weeks – but at the price of losing the war on terrorism. For, as we all know, the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq still goes on. Iraq is today a recruiting and training area for new terrorists and in Afghanistan the Taliban are recapturing power...

That such a war on terrorism or on terror (as it was later called) would fail, is something one could have learnt from current history as well as everyday experience: from the French answer to the FNL in Algeria, or the South African response to the anti-apartheid-movement; from the spiral of violence we experience in Israel, Palestine, and as well from the attacks on American and European cities. It is as simple as Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it: “Retaliation against a suicide bomber only gives rise to more suicide bombers.”⁸ In other words: fighting terrorism by war or military means is not sensible. Why?

The employment of massive military power makes it easier for terrorists to justify their attacks, to find broad support, and to recruit new followers. And by this States unintentionally comply with the subversive terrorist tactics and turn themselves into supporters, who campaigns for the terrorists and their aims. A leaflet of the German RAF describes the terrorist tactics:

that is the dialectic of anti-imperialist combat: that through the [...] reaction of the system, the escalation of the counter-revolution, the transformation of the political state of emergency into a military state of emergency, the enemy becomes apparent [...] and, by the means of its own terror, alienates the crowd, intensifies the antagonism, to necessitate the revolutionary battle.⁹

After 9/11 the USA played a inglorious role in helping to exacerbate the threat of an international Islamist terrorism. To fight terrorism, the USA were willing to give up principles that are constitutive for a liberal democracy. A few days after the assaults, a manhunt started, nearly 1.200 people suspected of being terrorists or supporter of terrorists were preventively detained on account of their ethnical origin or religious affiliation. Most of them were not allowed to speak to a lawyer or their families. To get information considered necessary for the war on terrorism, the USA was also willing to legalize torture; even though this would be a clear violation of the International Humanitarian Law and the US Constitution. The 8th Amendment of the US Constitution clearly prohibits “cruel and unusual punishments”. But former US attorney general Alberto Gonzales wrote the following as an adviser to the Attorney General, stating that the limits of the International Human Law do not apply to terrorists:

The nature of [a war against terrorism, A.B.] places a high premium on [...] factors such as the ability to quickly obtain information from captured terrorists and their sponsors [...] and the need to try terrorists for war crimes. [T]his new paradigm renders obsolete Geneva’s strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners [...] ¹⁰

⁸ Quoted in: Govier Trudy: *A delicate balance. What Philosophy can tell us about Terrorism*, Oxford 2002, p. 94.

⁹ Leaflet of the RAF, quoted in: Waldmann, Peter: *Terrorismus. Provokation der Macht*, Munich 1998, p. 27 (translated by the author).

¹⁰ “The Alberto Gonzales Memo”, under: lawofwar.org/Torture_Memos_analysis.htm, retrieved on 11th June 2009.

Therefore, the protection from torture did not apply to anyone the USA regarded as a terrorist. The cruelty that happened in Guantanamo, in Afghanistan and Iraq are only consequences of an official policy that transformed general principles and norms into privileges. And, most importantly, it fostered a feeling of discrimination in the Muslim community¹¹.

Breaking the Vicious Circle

To reduce the threat of terrorism we significantly have to reduce the willingness of people to enlist in terrorism. Our "line of defence" must run through areas where we know (and fear) that new terrorists will be recruited: the less the assistance for extremists like Osama bin Laden becomes, the less the danger of future attacks will be.

The first step to achieve this is to talk to terrorists. Just like Obama recently made his willingness public to talk to moderate Taliban in Afghanistan. Being criticized for his bid both by leading members of the Afghan Taliban can be interpreted as a sign, that Obama's offer is directed at the right direction.¹² The Taliban are no less dependent on voluntary support than al Qaeda.

If we are willing to talk to terrorists we are opening up a window of opportunity for them to achieve some of their objectives in a peaceful way. But this, I must stress, means not to acknowledge each objective an organization has or to acknowledge the deeds it has done. It means merely to offer them the same award we offer refined rogue States like Libya: to become a negotiating partner. And offering the terrorists and their supporters a real and credible chance to achieve some of their objectives without violence will challenge the terrorists' claim of fighting necessarily by deadly force.

Of course, there always will be some supporters of violence for the sake of violence. But it will become more difficult for an organization to find support and to recruit new followers for its violent actions if there is a tangible peaceful alternative.

This I think is most convincing. By offering negotiations to terrorists, even when it seems to be a taboo, we start fighting terrorism where it stems from: in an environment where fighting by violence is perceived for whatever reason as the only option.

The same is true for Obama's latest initiative; only to a much greater extent. In his already famous Cairo-speech, Obama was right claiming that

[w]e meet at a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world [...]. Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims. The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to America and Western countries, but also to human rights. All this has bred more fear and more mistrust.¹³

Fear and mistrust are bad advisors but very helpful in creating or supporting prejudices that can be misused easily. The casebook example is the Palestine conflict. Palestine is part of the collective consciousness of the Muslim world; part of it is propaganda, part is hypocrisy. That

¹¹ Actually, there is no unitary Arab or Muslim *world*. The different Arab States as well as the Islamic denominations do not always have the best relations. Notwithstanding, a perceived external, i.e. non-Arab or non-Islamic threat, can be used to adjure the illusion of an Arab or Muslim entity.

¹² Cf. "Taliban say Obama's call on moderates 'illogical'", under: www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE5291GQ20090310?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews, retrieved on 11th June 2009.

¹³ The White House: "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning", under: www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/, retrieved on 11th June 2009

notwithstanding, the Palestinian conflict is proof of a biased international system, which Obama acknowledged explicitly by saying

that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years they've endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead. They endure the daily humiliations – large and small – that come with occupation.¹⁴

This situation delivers the perfect pretext to instrumentalize anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli prejudices, like Osama bin Laden did, e.g. to justify the assaults of 9/11:

And they [the assassins, A.B.] have done this [the attacks of 11th September, A.B.] because of our words – and we have previously incited and roused them to action – in self-defense, defense of our brothers and sons in Palestine [...]¹⁵

The Palestine conflict, taken together with references to current coercive measures, applied in the “GWOT”, enable bin Laden to construct the threat of a Western crusade against Islam as a whole. In an interview, recorded by Al Jazeera on 20th October 2001, the second week of the US attacks on Afghanistan, bin Laden made connections between the war in Afghanistan and a new crusade: “What about the people that have been killed in our lands for decades? [...] this is a war which, like previous wars, is reviving the Crusades.”¹⁶

Bin Ladens statements are political-religious motivated propaganda, intended to instigate the Muslims all around the world. And his statements fell on good ground and still do.

This point is decisive. A terrorist organization can gain broad support, whether the idea or ideology it stands for (or it claims to stand for) responds to an important need the addressees have. Bin Laden obviously responds to a growing feeling of discrimination in the Muslim world. And Islam, i.e. its radical interpretation, is perceived as an answer and a solution: it creates a feeling of belonging, it is an explanation for the felt discrimination, and it provides a justification for confrontation.

This means that Islamist extremism vitally needs the enmity of the Western (Christian) World, no matter whether it is real or just propaganda.

By publicly announcing, that “[t]he situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own”¹⁷, Obama responds in two connected ways to the threat of an Islamic motivated international terrorism.

Firstly, he responds very carefully to the deep felt discrimination by Muslims throughout the world. In contrast to former US-administrations Obama did not only elevate the Palestinians to equal status, he also considered “‘Palestine’ [as] a present reality”, said Robert Malley, director of the Middle East program at the International Crisis Group.¹⁸

¹⁴ The White House: “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning”, under: www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/, retrieved on 11th June 2009

¹⁵ Bin Laden, Osama: “Terror for Terror”, in: Lawrence, Bruce: *Messages to the World*, New York 2005, p. 107.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 117; 127.

¹⁷ The White House: “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning”, under: www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/, retrieved on 11th June 2009

¹⁸ Cf. Zeleny, Jeff and Helene Cooper: “Addressing Muslims, Obama Pushes Mideast Peace”, in: The New York Times, under: www.nytimes.com/2009/06/05/world/middleeast/05prexy.html, retrieved on 11th June 2009.

Secondly, he is taking the wind out of al Qaeda's sails, by offering a peaceful alternative to the violent, i.e. terrorist fight for an own Palestinian State. Which means a massive blast to al Qaeda, that justifies its deeds and even its existence mainly (but not exclusively) through the Palestinian conflict and the unequal treatment of Muslims.

Taken together, Obama's initiative offers a real chance to end the current war on terrorism – by transforming it into a political concept that aims to reduce the willingness to support or engage in terrorist acts.

The Palestinian conflict is constantly used by Islamist terrorists to justify their violent fight. Obama is now promising to solve one of the most pressing problems for the Muslim community, which would definitely reduce the support for and the belief in the necessity to fight for the Palestinian cause by violence. And, unlike the claim to hunt terrorists down, which is constitutive for the current GWOT, Obama's offer to talk will not provoke more violence. It is rather a rational attempt to break the vicious circle in which violence only causes more violence.

Even, as one may object, if terrorists like Osama bin Laden will have no interest in peaceful solutions, simply because such solutions would question the terrorist credo: that there is no alternative to violence, and therefore undermine their support, power, and, after all, their existence?

Yes, of course, because Obama's initiative tends not to influence the terrorists themselves, but their supporters and environment.

Statesmen, not Politicians

However, the bitter pill is: this initiative, given it will be implemented as promised, will only work out in the long run. It will take years, maybe generations, until mistrust and prejudices can be replaced through trust. And that calls for what John Rawls described as the "ideal of the statesman":

Statesmen are presidents or prime ministers or other high officials who, through their exemplary performance and leadership in their office, manifest strength, wisdom, and courage. They guide their people in turbulent and dangerous times. The ideal of the statesman is suggested by the saying: the politician looks to the next election, the statesman to the next generation.¹⁹

¹⁹ Rawls, John: *The Law of Peoples*, Cambridge 2001, p. 97