

For War or Peace

Issues of war and peace in the twenty first century

How Not to Fight Terrorism! Adil E. Shamoo

January 13, 2010

There is an old story regarding a conversation at the Yalta conference in February, 1945 during the Second World War. Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin were meeting near a small pond containing a half dozen gold fish. While the leaders were sipping their tea, they debated the best method for catching the fish in the pond. Stalin pulled his revolver and emptied it into the pond without any luck. Roosevelt used a fishing pole and gave up after a half an hour. Churchill took his tea spoon and began removing one spoon of water at a time. He explained: by emptying the pond, I will catch them all.

Al-Qaeda exists because of the 1.7 Billion Muslims worldwide, a large portion are discontent and angry at the policies of the United States. This discontent provides the pond water for their recruitment into al-Qaeda. Most of these discontented Muslims will never practice terrorism but will, in some way, support some anti-American activities. They might attend a demonstration, hand out fliers, or help their relatives participating in anti-American groups. They might even provide financial support to groups that support this view - much like those loyal Irish-American families who provided support to the Irish Republican Army.

Many political analysts and talking heads will explain Al Qaeda's actions by saying what Americans like to hear: those jihadists Muslims hate our freedom. Whenever there is discontent and anger, there is a small fraction that will behave irrationally. However, the source of discontent, in large measure, is justified.

Yemen is a microcosm of the Muslim world. Yemen provides a fertile environment for al-Qaeda or other disaffected groups. Yemen's government is corrupt, repressive and bankrupt. The government is facing a rebellion in the north with Huthi rebels resulting in nearly two hundred thousand refugees. In the south, there is a potential for full blown civil war and secession. What is not known to many Americans is that beginning in 1967, southern Yemen was an independent country with a communist government until the unity with the north in 1990s. Southern Yemenis feel cheated by the central government for not fulfilling any of the promises made through the unification process.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia are supporting this corrupt government. The U.S. is using drones and covert operations to root out al-Qaeda from Yemen. If we kill and capture every al-Qaeda member in Yemen, other groups like it will appear as long as our policy of supporting the corrupt government continues.

We need to understand why some people are angry at us. Yes, al-Qaeda uses terror against us which is unacceptable and we should try to kill and capture every one of them. However, in order to reduce the pond water for al-Qaeda and like organizations, we need to change our foreign policy as well. We cannot combat terrorism, and those who support it, without recognizing the reasons that bring people to these actions

Our current policy of supporting the Yemeni's repressive government will only increase the pond water of discontent and anger at us, not just in Yemen, but among the world's 1.7 Billion Muslims. We speak of freedom and democracy as we use the most modern killing machines and drones to kill terrorists, but also innocent people. Did we forget that we just invaded Iraq without a justifiable reason? And the invasion caused the death of hundreds of thousands and nearly a million wounded Iraqis - a country of twenty five million! Why do we expect the Muslims to forget what happened to them? We never forget the loss of one of our soldiers or citizens. Why should Muslims be any different?

We are justified in the killing and capture of every al-Qaeda member. But it is a short range goal. Simultaneously we must also stop supporting repressive regimes that kill, torture, and starve their people. We need to have a long range policy of being on the right side of history – of freedom and democracy. But first, we need to heed the wisdom of Churchill, and use a large spoon to drain the pond.

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