

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT  
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UNITED STATES DEFENSE AGAINST TERRORISM:  
WHAT ABOUT ITS PREVENTION?

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The US government has put in place multiple measures to defend the country and the people against terrorism as if terrorist attacks are imminent. The defense budget has been raised. The security forces have been rewarded with higher salaries. All branches of the armed forces now have more resources than they had dreamed of a year ago. Access to airports has been restricted. Travel security screening has been promoted to levels unheard of in recent US history. A Department of Home Security is in the making. It will employ about 170,000 employees. Security at public functions and around government buildings has been introduced and tightened.

The US government has taken severe measures to restrict immigration from certain countries. Visitor visas are now hard to get. Non-citizen legal residents have become subject to investigation, detention, and surveillance, with no charges against them. Even US citizens originating from certain regions have been subjected to profiling, suspicion, and harassment. The US government has also imposed a pseudo-alliance with various countries against terrorism by declaring any country that does not join the fight as a supporter of terrorism. Furthermore, American forces have been deployed in the Philippines, Yemen, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and others on the pretense of training local forces to fight terrorism.

Are we more secure now than we were a few months ago? The administration says we are, but in reality we seem to be suffering from deep feelings of insecurity and paranoia. How else would we allow the Department of Justice to infringe on civil liberties, freedom of movement, and due process? How else would we tolerate the Operation TIPS, even as an idea, and ask our utility service people to snoop on their clients and report anything suspicious they observe, with no training or expertise in what to look for? The postman, the truck driver, and the gas and electric company representative may now all become informers. Probably the Department of Justice will require all of us to spy on each other, on our neighbors, and on anybody we care to and report what we want against them in the name of security and the fight against terrorism. The imaginary security touted by the US administration may turn out to be nothing but compound insecurity, for now one should be afraid not only of terrorists but also of the potential informers who live next door. If this is not insecurity and paranoia, why are small planes still taboo in the skies of Washington, DC? Why have all functionaries at Capitol Hill been furnished with "Escape Masks" to be able to escape when the terrorists attack?

The insecurity and paranoia injected into the American society, in spite of all the measures taken and still underway, are due more to omission than to commission by the administration. It is not only that the measures put in place cannot prevent a determined terrorist, say a suicide bomber, from causing harm and creating terror. It is the failure to

take measures to prevent terrorism at its root that renders those measures inadequate. If the administration were to find the causes of terrorism and remove them, the potential terrorists will have no cause to fight for, nor will they have support for their actions in host countries. The allocation of large budgets and cadres of human and physical capital to fight terrorism may be necessary and unavoidable, both to scare away terrorism and to reassure the people that their safety is a top priority. But these allocations are at the expense of other sectors of the economy and the freedoms and liberties of the people. For instance, could security not be realized at lower than the estimated costs? Could the administration not achieve its objectives without infringing on the environment of liberty, freedom of movement, and feelings of security that prevailed before September 11, 2001? Could the administration not make the imagined security more real and complete than has been the case? The answer to all three questions is YES.

Probably the first step is to find out why terrorism is aimed at the United States more than at any other western developed, or rich country. Second, it is important for the US to balance its interests in other countries with the interests of the people of those countries. Third, it is safer and more productive to bring about change in other countries by co-opting the people than by imposing change on them. Finally, it is more prudent and efficient to seek security at the lowest possible cost than to operate on the motto of "security at any cost" as seems to have been the case.

It may be difficult to identify the causes for terrorism. However, some indicators suggest that the placement of US forces in certain countries is regarded as an infringement on their sovereignty, even if agreed to by the regimes in power in those countries. Another possible cause is the flagrant violation of the principle of fairness, even-handedness, and neutrality in dealing with conflict areas such as the Middle East, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict. Still another possible cause is the insistence of the US administration that other countries introduce reform before they can receive assistance from international institutions, regardless of whether those countries are interested, willing, or equipped to institute reform. In most cases those countries find themselves unable to face the immediate negative effects of the proposed reforms; the US administration pays little attention to the suffering of the people in question. Unfortunately the US government has done little to assess whether such grievances are genuine, serious, and causal factors in the explaining terrorism. On the other hand, there is little indication that the placement of US forces abroad has been subject to review and analysis with interests of the host countries taken seriously into consideration. If anything, the declarations of the US government suggest reinforcement of the policy of deployment of US forces abroad to fight terrorism, to topple Saddam Hussein of Iraq, or to combat drug trade in Colombia, regardless how the people of those countries feel about these actions.

There is little indication either, that fairness and even-handedness in foreign affairs have been enhanced in recent months. Looking at US policies relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, one wonders whether fairness and neutrality and even-handedness exist in the dictionaries of the US government or the Congress.

The slogan of security at any cost has virtually been institutionalized, in the sense that allocations for security are rarely questioned or scrutinized by either party. Yet, one can imagine how much more effective would the expenditure of a few billion dollars on

development and cooperation with other countries than spending them on arms that will never be used against terrorism in this country or abroad. One can imagine how positive the impact could be of a grant of a few billion dollars to the budding Union of African Nations especially if offered with no strings attached. The most important benefit of such expenditures would be to weaken the support the terrorists enjoy in the poor and underdeveloped countries. Finally, the US has shown little sensitivity to the negative impact of its globalization policy on most developing countries, with little positive results to show for it. Even the World Bank and the IMF have found it necessary to reconsider their approach. Yet, the rhetoric of the US administration and its attempts to impose reform and spread globalization have not abated.

All this is not to say that defensive measures are not necessary. It is to argue that such measure can be more effective when combined with an attack on the causes of terrorism. It is also to argue that a review of US economic and trade relations with other countries is necessary, taking into consideration the interests of those countries, as well as of those of the United States. Fairness and even-handedness, and concern for the viewpoints of others will go a long way toward reducing grievances that might be used as excuses for terrorism. The fact that allies and friends of the US in Europe and elsewhere do not agree with its policies in the Middle East argues for a critical review of these policies. Finally, trying for security at the lowest possible cost is more efficient than seeking security at any cost. Working with other countries to change policy or fight terrorism is more economical than demanding their compliance with policies that may not be to their benefit as they see them. The US has no option but to look for the causes of terrorism and remove them if it is to overcome terrorism and not just defend against it.

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