

The chaos of war spreads to Saudi Arabia, Turkey

Author Jessica Stern says the recent bombings in Istanbul and Riyadh show that the U.S. war on terror is deeply flawed.

By Mark Follman

The latest barrage of terrorist attacks in Riyadh and Istanbul, culminating in Thursday's deadly bombing of the British Consulate and London-based HSBC bank, may be a signal that the war on terror is moving into a new and unpredictable phase. Less than two weeks ago, a huge blast decimated the Muhaya housing complex in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, and all of the dead were Arabs. Last weekend, terrorists hit a synagogue in Istanbul, Turkey. Thursday's twin strikes in Istanbul killed at least 27 people—including British Consul General Roger Short—and injured more than 400.

To Western terrorism experts, the most recent attacks raise more questions than they answer, and many of those questions focus on the effectiveness of the U.S.-led war on terror. The attacks are widely considered to be the continued work of al-Qaida, but how organized or effective does Osama bin Laden's terrorist network remain? Do such suicide attacks, increasingly carried out against "soft targets" and killing more and more Arabs and Muslim civilians in the process, indicate a disorganized, weakened Islamist movement, or one that is gaining momentum toward its goal of regional upheaval? Perhaps most importantly, has the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq helped al-Qaida's cause by unleashing a Pandora's box of Islamist sympathizers and would-be suicide bombers across the region?

Terrorism expert Jessica Stern, a public policy lecturer at Harvard University and author of "Terror in the Name of God," says a Bush administration focused almost exclusively on a military war against terrorists is failing the equally vital war of ideas in the Muslim world—just as rancor toward the U.S. rises sharply in the shadow of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. And that may cultivate even more fertile ground for terror attacks in the Middle East, especially in pro-Western countries such as Turkey, she says.

"In Turkey the level of antipathy toward the U.S. went way up in the wake of the Iraq war, which would seem to work to the advantage of terrorists planning attacks," Stern told Salon in an interview. "I believe we're not paying nearly enough attention to the psychological aspects of the war [on terror]. We shouldn't worry exclusively about people who are prepared to pick up a gun. We should be equally worried about people who are going to open their doors and provide logistic support—terrorists do require support in the broader population. Iraq is absolutely pouring fuel on the fire."

The Bush administration has downplayed the growing insurgency against U.S. soldiers in Iraq, calling it a last act of "desperation" by Ba'ath party loyalists—and some terrorism experts, including Daniel Benjamin of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have echoed that view regarding the recent terrorist attacks across the region. Benjamin told the Washington Post that "low-value" targets like the Muhaya compound in Riyadh, a suburban complex housing very few Western civilians that was bombed on Nov. 8, suggest "pretty poor tradecraft" and thus a weakened al-Qaida network in the Saudi kingdom.

While the past week's attacks on a Jewish synagogue and British institutions in Istanbul could be viewed in the same light, Stern says there's no way to know definitively whether al-Qaida, having devolved since losing its state protection in Afghanistan, has weakened. In fact, she says, there's just as much reason to believe that al-Qaida is "recovering and showing new strength."

Robert Baer, a former CIA officer with extensive experience in the Middle East, subscribes even more so to that darker view. "I think we're moving into a much more chaotic situation in the region," Baer told Salon. "The old rules no longer apply." Baer

believes that the longer the U.S. bogs down with the Iraq occupation, the greater the threat that such terrorist chaos will migrate to other parts of the region.

There is undoubtedly a growing nervousness from Cairo to Islamabad, agrees Judith Kipper, director of the Middle East Forum at the Council on Foreign Relations. But she is much more confident that the regimes in the neighborhood will effectively crack down on militant fundamentalist groups, whether loose local affiliates, “copy cat” groups, or al-Qaida operatives themselves. Yet, like Stern, she is deeply troubled by the apparent U.S. reliance on pure military power in Iraq, as the reconstruction stalls in a state of low-grade chaos.

“The lack of a realistic postwar plan in Iraq is really unfortunate,” Kipper told Salon in an interview Tuesday. “It didn’t have to be that way. Just about anyone could have told you that the Iraqis weren’t going to dance in the streets [following a U.S. invasion]. A lot of Iraqis who could’ve helped us, we treated like criminals—the scientists who could have really told us what was going on inside Saddam’s regime, who could have revealed the weapons programs. We essentially made the Sunnis the enemy of the [new] state, but not every one of them was Saddam. The administration acted with arrogance and ignorance.”

With its secular Islamic government particularly damnable in the eyes of fundamentalists, Turkey, Stern says, is as prime a target as any for al-Qaida. And while there is still virtually no way to pin down the terror network’s broader strategy or its ability to organize and carry out attacks effectively, she says, the focus must shift to al-Qaida’s greatest potential source of support currently—an Arab population growing increasingly frustrated with the U.S.

Salon reached Stern by phone Thursday in Cambridge, Mass.

Q: Do you see the recent wave of terror attacks, first in Riyadh two weeks ago, and the two subsequent attacks in Istanbul, as an organized effort by al-Qaida across the region?

Well, we don’t really know at this point. My sense is that it is al-Qaida, probably working together with local groups, which is its modus operandi in general. The fact that al-Qaida and a local group have taken credit for the attacks in Turkey supports that conclusion, but isn’t necessarily proof.

Q: It appears that yesterday’s attacks on the British Consulate and HSBC Bank in Istanbul were timed with President Bush’s visit to London. Is this another indication of broader strategic organization, and is bin Laden part of the picture?

The timing seems likely to have been intentional, but of course we can’t really know. In terms of bin Laden’s role, al-Qaida’s attacks have always been a combination of those planned by bin Laden and other top leaders, and local leaders who have to take care of fundraising and other logistics on their own, including target selection. So it’s a mixture of franchise organizations and formal members of the international Islamic front, and local groups prepared to act in al-Qaida’s name, which recruit various individuals. So what we call “al-Qaida” is really evolving, which makes fighting it militarily, and with intelligence, much more difficult.

What I’m suggesting is that we need to be focusing a lot more, not on just terrorists themselves, but on the broader population that is beginning to provide them support—including in Iraq.

Q: So are you saying that you think al-Qaida may in fact be growing stronger?

I would say that it’s become different. They were probably a lot better off when they could use the state [of Afghanistan] as their corporate headquarters. It’s probably harder to plan a massive attack while on the run as they are now—especially in terms of the difficulty that creates for their communications. Their operating environment has certainly changed, but they’re adapting, and I think these attacks show the strength of a

more decentralized approach. It's not Sept. 11, but these attacks are still significant, still a big deal.

Q: If this is an organized effort by al-Qaida, what is its broader strategy? Why go after Turkey, aside from its obvious pro-Western leanings?

It's not just Turkey's pro-Western leanings, but the fact that an Islamic party was elected in a democratic government. While some Islamic scholars have argued convincingly that the best way to implement sharia [the system of Islam-inspired law that covers not only religious rituals but day-to-day life] is through a democratic regime, the radical revivalists reject democracy outright. So in a way Turkey is more of an affront, not just because of its links with the U.S. and the West, and its desire to join Europe, but because of the fact that it's a democracy where an Islamic party has come to power.

Q: Does that make Turkey a more important target to al-Qaida than Saudi Arabia or Pakistan?

Perhaps. It's hard to say, but al-Qaida does appear to have more support in Pakistan [and its regime], for example . . . In terms of attacking inside Turkey, think of the murder of Anwar Sadat: It was inspired by the notion that the first goal has to be to cleanse the Islamic world of secular leaders. I think Turkey is perceived [by militant Islamists] as secular in general, but even worse, an Islamic party there is participating in a democratic regime.

Meanwhile, in Turkey the level of antipathy toward the U.S. went way up in the wake of the Iraq war, which would seem to work to the advantage of terrorists planning attacks.

Q: What does al-Qaida hope to achieve with these bombings?

Al-Qaida's goal is to take down the current governments and establish Islamist regimes, to reestablish the Caliphate [a land or country under Islamic rule] throughout the region and [perhaps] throughout the entire world. Because of this they have it in for secular Islamic rule and secular Muslims as much as anything else. What they would call purifying the Islamic world is at least as important an objective to them, I think, as punishing the West.

Q: To what degree is this recent wave of al-Qaida attacks connected to the insurgency against the U.S. occupation in Iraq? Is it a coordinated effort?

I think there is no way to answer that at this point. The one thing that we do know is that the war in Iraq has dramatically increased antipathy toward the U.S. That is definitely assisting the al-Qaida movement. It has also turned Iraqi citizens increasingly against the U.S., so the war plays a big role in that regard, whether or not there is evidence that these groups are coordinating their attacks with those against U.S. soldiers in Iraq. I'm not clear at all that there are any organizational links.

Q: The Bush administration has characterized the anti-U.S. insurgency in Iraq as a last act of "desperation," and we heard the same thing echoed by the Saudis about the latest terrorist attack in Riyadh. Do you think this is an accurate assessment? Or are we perhaps witnessing the contrary—a rising wave of a new regional effort by al-Qaida?

I'm not sure we have enough evidence to make either claim, but I don't know why anyone would draw the conclusion that al-Qaida is in a "desperate" stage now. It seems equally likely to me that they are recovering and showing new strength.

Q: With so many resources focused on Iraq, is the U.S. effectively battling the terror threat elsewhere?

Definitely not. I think we've focused exclusively on the military aspects of the war on terrorism, and we've forgotten that terrorism is psychological warfare more than

anything else. I believe we're not paying nearly enough attention to the psychological aspects of this war.

Q: What should the U.S. be doing in that regard?

I think we must realize that we are competing with Saudi charities for hearts and minds. We have to realize that the war is indeed about ideas, and that our enemies are spreading their ideas through social welfare activities. We should learn from them, and compete with them in this regard. Iraq is absolutely pouring fuel on the fire.

Q: Has the U.S. gained the necessary cooperation from foreign governments in the battle against terrorists, especially in the Mideast region?

My guess is that we're trying very hard to get it. It's essential, and I think we're going to see more and more cooperation. It does seem that the Saudis started to take this threat a lot more seriously after the attacks on their own soil. They began to look at changing the curriculum in their religious schools, for example.

Q: How do these types of attacks affect popular sympathy for al-Qaida's alleged cause? Is attacking so-called soft targets and killing a lot of Arabs and Muslims in the process a strategic error on its part?

I know a lot of people have been arguing that it is. I think it's too soon for us to judge. Look, we've seen Islamist groups killing Muslims before—it's nothing new. It's conceivable that in the bigger picture it doesn't get in their way.

And I think this goes back to the same essential point: I think we shouldn't worry exclusively about people who are prepared to pick up a gun. We should be equally worried about people who are going to open their doors and provide logistical support—terrorists do require support in the broader population. This was highlighted by the CIA report leaked to the Philadelphia Inquirer last week about the change in attitude toward the U.S. occupation in Iraq.

Q: So you seem to be saying that without state protection in Afghanistan or elsewhere, this wider support network—perhaps having grown bigger, and more sympathetic since the U.S. invasion of Iraq—is a crucial battleground now.

That's absolutely right, and to date, I think it's where we are failing the fight.

Mark Follman is an editorial fellow at Salon.