

Foreword

Is the enterprise of terrorism finally in a retreat? In South Asia, at least, there are some indications that this may be so. With the exception of the apparently indiscriminate slaughters in Nepal since the breakdown of the 'peace process' with the Maoist rebels in August 2003, fatality rates have registered a decline in almost all theatres in the region. More significantly, the rhetoric emanating from the region's primary state sponsor of terrorism, Pakistan, has veered sharply away from the patterns of the past. In his recent pronouncements the country's military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, has abandoned the ambivalent idiom of 'legitimate *jihad*' against the 'oppression of Muslims' in different parts of the world, and the 'indigenous freedom struggle' in Kashmir. In his address to a convention of *Ulema* in Islamabad on February 18, 2004, Musharraf blamed "a small minority" of terrorists and extremists for giving the country and Islam a "bad name". He put terrorist formations in the country, including "foreign militants," on notice, declaring that they should "surrender or return to their own countries," threatening them with "the full might of the Pakistani Army if they resisted."¹

While Musharraf is certainly being disingenuous in absolving himself, the Pakistani Army and its covert agencies, for their role in nurturing terrorism – both regional and international – there is evidence that there now is, in fact, a growing determination to break with the past. The two attempts on Musharraf's life in December 2003, and the danger, as Musharraf himself expressed it, that "the day was not far away when the world would turn on

¹ "General in mufti blasts terror before ulema," *The Times of India*, New Delhi, February 19, 2004.

Pakistan militarily and bombs rained down on the country”,² are the obvious triggers to this turnaround. While these are the visible proximate causes, the broader context of these transformations is clearly a realization that terrorism was no longer paying the dividends of the past, and continuing with covert military adventures could prove suicidal to Pakistan.

But is this the prelude to a final winding down of terror, or a tactical hibernation? Until conclusive evidence emerges to the contrary, it is prudent to be sceptical, and to recognize the possibility of a terrorist resurgence. The course of the war in Iraq assumes unprecedented importance in this context. The magnitude and fullest consequences of the US failure to ‘manage the peace’ in Iraq remain uncertain, but it is clear that the outcome of events in this theatre will have critical impact on the future of terrorism, in general. The steady loss of American lives in Iraq, the inability of the US Forces to impose order and project a sense of control, and the visible and growing consternation among the US Forces, media, political establishment and general public, are being taken as proof by Islamist extremist forces that the world’s ‘sole superpower’ is vulnerable to this methods of sub-conventional warfare. If these trends continue, or worse, if there is a progressive ‘Vietnamization’ of the situation in Iraq, culminating in a scenario where the US may be tempted to ‘declare victory and run’, the consequences would be disastrous. Such an eventuality would be seen as a defeat for the superpower by the forces of Islamist extremism, and would immensely widen the opportunities and operational space for terrorism of all forms by demonstrating the weaknesses and vulnerability of the democratic world and its wealthiest and most militarised leader.

It is in Iraq, then, and that the future of terrorism is presently being shaped. Even a qualified victory for terrorism in this theatre would encourage terrorist movements in other theatres – and not just Islamist terrorists – to revive or intensify their fury against the structures of freedom and civilization.

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² Ibid.