

Implications of war on terror

With the developments in Afghanistan, many Saudi youth who had gone abroad to fight holy wars are likely to return home and pose a challenge to the al-Saud. It is not clear if the West will be able to fight the war on terror in Saudi Arabia and without a victory in Saudi Arabia, it will be an incomplete war, writes Sundeep Waslekar.

There are more questions than answers about the implications of war on terror. Top leaders of Taliban and Al Qaeda remain at large and there are questions of strategic stability in the entire region from West to South Asia. In particular, internal stability in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan would be under pressure. Thirdly, new questions have come up about the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as between the United States and China using Pakistan, as the main theatre for such competition. Also there is a risk of an India-Pakistan side-show.

Taliban says that the Taliban will be out of the caves once the winter is over and launch an onslaught against the Northern Alliance. If this is correct, there will be a season of uncertainty in the spring. The cost of Afghanistan's recovery is estimated at \$15 billion. While it is not clear what Afghanistan's new government can expect from the international community, the latter will certainly demand a guarantee from the former that it will no longer provide abode to terrorist networks.

The United States chose to attack Afghanistan, even though most of those involved in the attacks on September 11, 2001 were Saudi nationals. Saudi Arabia is witnessing an intense competition for power in the House of Saud. It is much more than a power competition. It represents the tensions between socio-economic modernism and religious

orthodoxy, between corrupt and puritanical governance, between global and indigenous view of the world. The competition between Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan is dangerous because it reflects an underlying conflict in the Saudi society. Since 1951 Saudi Arabia's per capita income has more than halved from \$16000 to roughly \$7500-8000. Its young men feel anguished to see their own employment prospects declining while the members of the royal family make money on defence deals. As the Saudi regime maintains a very high social control and allows only Islamic organisations to function, since it cannot really confront any group formed in the name of religion, dissenters have no alternative but to seek an Islamic platform. The resentment towards the ruling family has particularly grown since the Gulf War of 1991, with the presence of American soldiers on the Saudi soil and a feeling that the Saudi treasury was overcharged for the war bill. This has led to the creation of groups such as Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), Committee against corruption in Saudi Arabia (CACSA), Shia Reform movement led by Shaikh Hassan al-Saffar, Osama bin Laden, and the now defunct committee for the Defence of legitimate rights (CDLR). So far, the ruling family has managed to respond to these groups by repression and co-optation in the Shura at home for those who are pliable, exiling those like MIRA who are defiant to UK and exporting those like Osama bin Laden to fight Islamic wars abroad. With

the developments in Afghanistan, many Saudi youth who had gone abroad to fight holy wars are likely to return home and pose a challenge to the al-Saud. It is not clear if the West will be able to fight the war on terror in Saudi Arabia and without a victory in Saudi Arabia, it will be an incomplete war. In fact, the Americans might decide to withdraw troops gradually from Saudi Arabia. This will be ironic since Osama bin Laden's primary demand was the withdrawal of the US troops.

Saudi Arabia has been primarily responsible for the growth of madrassas in Pakistan since the early 1980s, with implications for Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. It remains to be seen if the Saudis will return to this strategy. Also, if the US has to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia, it will have the temptation to relocate them, fully or partially, in Afghanistan or Pakistan. This will upset China and disturb its relations with Pakistan, forcing China to build new brigades with India.

What the Saudis will do would depend partially on internal developments in Iran. Just like Saudi Arabia, Iran is highly urbanised, with almost 60 per cent population living in cities. Half of Iran's population is below 21 years old. At the top of the structure, there is a power competition raging between President Khatami and Spiritual leader al-Khamenei. The spiritual leader has powers to dismiss the President, cabinet ministers and judges and he has been using these powers ruthlessly, closing newspapers, arresting journalists and thinkers, and suppressing any sign of

dissent among intellectuals. Any future crisis in Iran, and its spill over into South Asia, will also be determined by the US policy.

The United States considers Iran as a major source of terrorism. Iran's support for Hizbollah is known. Iran has also been sponsoring conferences of the Palestinian intifada where President Khatami and spiritual leader al-Khamenei hold personal consultations with the heads of intifada groups. Iran has also played a key role in facilitating reconciliation between Hizbollah and Hamas. While these activities are aimed at the Middle East theatre, an action against Iran by the United States will have repercussions in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India where Shia Muslims, though in minorities, have a significant presence. The US may also consider action in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Lebanon but that would not have direct significance for South Asia.

The single most important factor in South Asia's stability is the question of how the competition between forces of modernism and religious orthodoxy in Pakistan would evolve. General Musharraf's philosophical vision has the potential to change the course of events in South Asia but the specific policy measures, which he has proposed evoke scepticism regarding a programme to modernise and regulate madrassas, ban on Jehadi organisations and so on.

There is a curious pattern in the response General Musharraf has received from Islamic parties and groups in Pakistan. When he first joined the war against terror on September 12

last year, there were demonstrations in NWFP and Baluchistan, the areas where Jamat-e-Ulema Islami has influence. There was no protest in Punjab where Jamat-e-Islami has influence. But since January 12 this year, Jamat-e-Ulema Islami has supported him whereas Jamat-e-Islami has been critical of him. Pakistan's growth rate has fallen from 6 per cent of GNP in the early 1980s to 5 per cent at the beginning of the 1990s to 4 per cent at the end of the 1990s to 2.6 per cent last year. This year as well as next year, it will find it very difficult to move above 3 per cent.

Considering the population growth rate of over 2 per cent, in the next two years the per capita increase in income will be hardly 1 per cent. Pakistan has suffered losses of \$2 billion on account of the

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Afghan war. The Paris Club rescheduling of debts and other grants will benefit it to the extent of \$2 billion per year. Thus, its losses may get offset and the balance of payments crisis will be averted but it will not get much extra cash to generate rural employment which is the source of social problems. The most significant threat to the South Asian strategic stability is from India-Pakistan confrontation. No de-escalation can be expected until at least March or April or until Pakistan hands over at least five persons from the infamous list of 20. There is no possibility of a military confrontation but the diplomatic and psychological warfare may continue. ●