

Post 9/11: New Research Agenda?

A round table discussion on *Post 9/11: New Research Agenda?* was organised by the Centre on 27 October 2003. Prof. Stephen Cohen, Senior Fellow of the The Brookings Institution initiated the discussion.

Prof. Cohen was of the opinion that the United States (US) had over reacted to the events of 9/11. The President of the US saw the terrorist act of 9/11 as a great strategic challenge. Terrorism was in fact was more of a police and intelligence problem than a strategic problem. It was sometimes used as a political-military tactic by particular groups at particular times. Sometimes, it was even used by the States. Every State supported terrorism including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the US. So, President George Bush led the country down the wrong avenue when he declared war against terrorism. Bush for his own reasons - partially domestic and partially political - embarked on the path of total war. Total war would not work against terrorism. Terrorism could sometimes be controlled but could never be stopped. Prof. Cohen said that the Americans had a fascination for total war and cited examples from history. And President Bush had created a story that the US was in a total crusade against radical Islam. The US defined terrorism, as if terrorism directed against the US was terrorism and those directed against the rest were not terrorism. Soon after, a lot of other countries like India and Russia brought in the question about their war against terrorism. Prof Cohen had no problem with the invasion of Afghanistan, but the invasion of Iraq clearly had nothing to do with terrorism. It had to do with Bush Administration's agenda of making up for the past.

He then briefly touched about how the Brookings Institution responded to the 9/11 events. Immediately thereafter several conferences were organised on Islam. The primary objective was to brief the officials, those in the Congress and the public. He underlined the importance of public discourse. He also highlighted the problem of getting funds to promote a proper understanding of Islam. He said the foundations that were funding had their own research agendas. None of them were interested in Islam and ethnic and religious issues. Special emphasis was placed by his institution on bringing visiting scholars from the affected regions, not only from the Middle East, but also from the South and Southeast Asia. The need was to have a holistic understanding of the problem. The focus could not be only on the Middle East, but also on Islamic terrorism elsewhere.

In the discussion that followed, Prof. Cohen said that there were two different schools. One of them was the traditional Islamic school, not part of the modern world. To that belonged the fundamentalist Islamic groups and were a drag on the society. Taliban could be clubbed with that group. To the other school belonged groups like Al Qaida. They were basically a western creation. They use the Islamic garb for their activities. So, modern Islamic radicalism was a western problem and not an Islamic problem. The way to deal with them would be to promote good governance and democracy. A functioning democracy would prevent such movements from emerging.

Prof. Cohen also said that Pakistan was a real problem for both the US and India. Pakistan had moved from a state supporting terrorism to a state unable to control

terrorism. Many Pakistanis agree to that. The research agenda would be to find a solution to that.

In replying to a question Prof. Cohen said that the terrorists were western educated. Osama bin Laden hatred for the West and the US had nothing to do with Islam. 9/11 and aftermath had nothing to do with Islam. They were primarily angered with US-Saudi relationship. They were brought together inadvertently by the US in Afghanistan. He rejected the argument that deprivation and repression had anything to do with terrorism.

One of the points that was made during the discussion was that could a distinction between Islamic terrorism and Islam be made at all. The interrogation of terrorists captured in Jammu and Kashmir had revealed that they had a specific agenda. A litany of accusation was made against the non-Muslim world. A consistency could be found in the arguments put forward by them raising doubts that they emanate from a specific source. It is not possible unless there was some kind of tutoring.

Responding to another question Prof. Cohen said that what was happening between India and Pakistan was not terrorism. It was an undeclared war. As a result of nuclearisation, India was inhibited from going across the border. Pakistan would view it as revenge for 1971. There was an opinion in Indian side that Pakistan was a temporary state and sooner or later it would come into fold. Pakistanis were firm that Indians and Pakistanis are two different people.

To a question that the US on one hand was fighting terrorism while on the other hand was helping Pakistan, a breeding ground for terrorism Prof. Cohen replied that any attempt to destabilise Pakistan would only result in the Islamic fundamentalists coming to power. So what could the US do short of supporting the General? It would not be possible to wage a war to establish democracy in Pakistan. The US, from its perspective was worried about its war. If Pakistan's connection with the US were severed, it would move in a far more dangerous direction. According to him, the best weapon of India would be the power of its economy and society.