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Looking Beyond Terrorism

By Philip Giraldi
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President Barack Obama has stated that he has a low threshold for "success" in Afghanistan. He wants an Afghanistan that can no longer serve as a base for any terrorist group that would be able to attack the United States. Assuming that the President of the United States is true to his word, he should perhaps consider the possibility that the minimum objective for an American withdrawal from Afghanistan has already been achieved. If that is so, it is time for the United States to end its de facto occupation of the country and leave the Afghan people to settle on a form of government that will satisfy their needs, not those of a segment of the international community led by Washington.

The fact is that the threat from terrorism has been greatly exaggerated for political reasons to create a sense of fear that has enabled Democrats and Republicans alike to aggrandize power in the federal government. The US State Department issues an annual report that identifies the "state sponsors" of terrorism, those countries that allegedly support and provide a safe haven for terrorist movements. The list has significance because inclusion on it automatically triggers sanctions and other punitive measures, but the report itself and the politics that drive it make its conclusions highly questionable.

The current version identifies Cuba, the Sudan, Syria, and Iran as state sponsors but a careful reading of the report itself raises serious questions. The entry on Cuba concedes "Cuba no longer actively supports armed struggle in Latin America and other parts of the world." It justifies Cuba's inclusion on the list by noting that Havana endorses the activities of nominally Marxist Western hemisphere terrorist groups like Colombia's FARC. Does Cuba's encouragement of a terrorist group that it does not actually assist constitute state sponsorship? More important, does Cuba actually threaten the United States through its actions? Or is Cuba on the list because there is a powerful anti-Cuban lobby in Miami? The question answers itself.

Then there is the Sudan, also on the list. The entry on Sudan admits "Sudan remained a cooperative partner in global counterterrorism efforts. During the past year, the Sudanese government continued to pursue terrorist operations directly involving threats to US interests

and personnel in Sudan." So why is Sudan listed? Reading the report reveals that Sudan is named because it has not proscribed Hamas, which it considers a legitimate political party in the Palestinian territories and a national liberation movement, a view that is shared by much of the world. Does Sudan threaten the United States or support any group that threatens the United States? No. So one might reasonably question why it is on a terrorism list compiled by the United States Department of State.

Syria is also on the State Department list. According to the report, Syria "has not been directly implicated in an act of terrorism since 1986" but the Syrians defend "what they considered to be legitimate armed resistance by Palestinians and Hizballah against Israeli occupation of Arab territory." As Syria is still technically at war with Israel and Israel occupies Syrian territory this viewpoint should astonish no one. The ongoing hostility means in practice that Syria permits Hamas, Hizballah, and three lesser Palestinian groups to have representational offices in Damascus. Does the existence of the offices of groups that Washington describes as terrorist but which cannot threaten the United States constitute a danger? Of course not. The United States has no legitimate national interest that is in any way threatened by Damascus and the inclusion of Syria on the State Department list is purely political in nature, motivated by disapproval of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

And finally there is Iran. Like Syria, Iran undeniably supports Hizballah and Hamas, which it regards as national liberation movements and also as legitimate political parties in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories. The State Department report also states that Tehran supports both the Afghan Taliban and Iraqi militants, a contention that is more significant in that it suggests active and ongoing confrontation with US forces in the region. But is the assertion of Iranian involvement true? Many observers believe that Iran's role in Iraq has been greatly exaggerated by the US government, which has needed a scapegoat to explain why the country continues to be experiencing major security problems more than six years after the US invasion. Actual evidence of Iranian involvement is hard to find. The suggestion that Iran would be aiding the Taliban is even more absurd for sectarian reasons. The Taliban consider Shi'ites like the Iranians to be heretics and has even sanctioned killing them. It has massacred Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan and it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that there is no love lost between the Taliban and Tehran. So again the question must be asked, what is the American horse in this race? As in the case of Syria, does Iran really threaten the United States because it supports two groups that themselves do not endanger the US? There is no American national interest involved and Washington should avoid labeling others as terrorists when it is simultaneously engaged in illegal military action that amounts to state sponsored terrorism in places like Pakistan and Somalia, with whom the US is not at war.

One of the real ironies of the State Department's terrorist list is its selectivity. FARC of Colombia is a terrorist group that has actually attacked, killed, and kidnapped Americans. A laptop captured by Colombian soldiers in March 2008 revealed that the Venezuelan intelligence services were actively negotiating with FARC to provide weapons and other support. Venezuela considers FARC to be a liberation movement, a view not shared by either Washington or Bogota, but perhaps there is another reason why Caracas is not on the state sponsor list. Venezuela provides 11% of the oil consumed in the United States and is the second biggest supplier of crude after only Canada and ahead of Saudi Arabia. If it were to be named a state sponsor of terrorism, buying its oil would become illegal.

And then there are the real terrorists. Al-Qaeda and its truncated leadership is still hiding in a cave in Pakistan with more than 100,000 US and NATO troops camped next door. An

increasing number of intelligence analysts and scholars believe that Usama bin Laden is actually dead. General Stanley McChrystal, US Commander in Afghanistan, has admitted that there is no al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Pakistani sources see little sign of activity directly attributable to al-Qaeda in their own country. They maintain that all of the suicide bombings in Pakistan over the past two years have been carried out by Pakistanis, not by the Arabs or Chechens normally associated with al-Qaeda. Professor Jean-Pierre Filiu of the highly esteemed French think tank the Paris Institute of Political Studies, sees an al-Qaeda in decline and on the run reduced to a tiny remnant forced to move frequently and under constant pressure. Does al-Qaeda threaten the United States? Well, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen seem to think so, but if they thought otherwise they would be out of a job. Perhaps the American public should begin to ask why hundreds of billions of dollars are being spent yearly to fight an enemy that might well be more imaginary than real. It is not unreasonable to suggest that it is time to put the genie back into the bottle and end the global war on terror once and for all. If President Obama really believes what he says, it is past time for him to accept that Afghanistan is a mess but unlikely to become a terrorist haven. Which means "mission accomplished" and it's time to leave.