

The other 'axis of evil'

By Hasan Pervéz

SEPTEMBER 11 did not trigger the changes that the world is now witnessing. Given the causes in which the current wave of terror attacks is rooted, it was merely a function of time before an event of such a catastrophic nature occurred. Thus, 9/11 only marked the overt start of the 'war' between forces that had been arraigning themselves against each other over a period of time.

In spite of the fact that for over two years now, the US has done all that it could to dismantle Al Qaeda, from destroying its home base to shutting down hundreds of bank accounts around the world, terror attacks continue with sickening regularity. Recent bombings in Riyadh and Casablanca merely underline the fact that the 'war' is far from over, prompting Fareed Zakaria of Newsweek to suggest that 'the larger battle that must be waged here is a battle against the political and ideological conditions that make such groups thrive'.

Be that as it may, 9/11 succeeded in creating a convergence of interests that ought to be recognised by Pakistan, as also the Islamic world. Indications of this convergence were visible soon after the September 11 attacks, when it was argued in an article published in the Wall Street Journal that in the coming war against terror, Israel, India, and Turkey were Washington's only 'allies for the long haul'. Although Turkey has now taken a more independent position, and can no longer be clubbed with these countries, both Israel and India find it increasingly to their advantage to be in the forefront of the on-going war against terror.

India had been quick to appreciate the opportunity that 9/11 had presented, even when the shape and form of the coming war was still uncertain. In what was an embarrassingly hasty

offer, India had pleaded with the US to launch the war against the Taliban regime from its territory. An incensed Arundhati Roy, the Pulitzer prize-winning author, mockingly described this unseemly haste with the remark that India was 'gyrating its hips' at the US. Given Pakistan's contiguity with Afghanistan and India's geographical separation, the Indian offer made little military sense.

Even though India was forced to take a back seat at that point, it continued to work on a multi-prong strategy aimed at exploiting the fallout of 9/11 to its advantage. This included marginalizing Pakistan, or better still, having it declared a terrorist state, while furthering its own claim to a regional superpower status. When the invasion of Iraq was being justified on the basis of the principle of 'pre-emption', India once again sought to club Pakistan with 'terrorist states', declaring that Pakistan, too, was a 'fit case for pre-emption'. Secretary of State Colin Powell had to issue a public rebuttal.

The synergy of interests that 9/11 has created is manifest in the rapidly increasing three-way ties being forged between the US, Israel, and India. It is clear that all the three share a common goal to contain what is being described as an Islamic threat. The US, of course, has a broader aim to pursue, looking at India as a possible counter-balance to China, which many in the US believe to be its strategic competitor in the region.

In reality, though both Israel and India have a very narrow and focussed agenda, the former aims to create a zone of security by subjugating its Arab neighbours with massive military superiority. India intends to eliminate the numerous irritants that Pakistan creates in pursuing its agenda on Kashmir, and in challenging New Delhi's claim to the status

of a regional superpower.

The fact is that Pakistan's nuclear capability is viewed with more than some trepidation in Washington, Tel Aviv, and New Delhi, all for their own specific reasons. While all the three see danger in the possibility of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of extremists, Israel must surely consider these weapons as a threat to its own security in a contingency that involves a war of survival against its Arab neighbours. India, of course, stands checkmated as long as Pakistan can claim strategic parity, thereby exacerbating the sense of frustration that haunts its political leadership. Cutting Pakistan down to size must, therefore, be the policy objectives of both Israel and India.

India has intelligently orchestrated its campaign against Pakistan, convincing sympathetic US officials that Pakistan's strategic parity with India continues to threaten regional security and stability. In a campaign designed to exploit the influence of the powerful Jewish lobby, India has made concerted efforts to establish close ties with Israel.

The massive arms deals and the scheduled visit of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to India next month only emphasizes the nature of these ties. Thus, the vision of an alliance of non-Muslim states in the Middle East and South Asian region to battle against 'Islamic terrorism' is now closer to fruition. The portentous views of Tunku Varadarajan, writing for the Journal back in September 2001, gives an insight into this vision: "Outside the Western world, as geographically defined, these three states (Turkey, Israel, and India) are perhaps the only ones on which the US can count, virtually unconditionally, to show an immutable opposition to Islamic terrorism. Crucially, they are all situated at terrorist nodes, in a

vast seething region in which Islamic states are preponderant" (Dawn, May25).

With a democratic Turkey now adopting a more independent stance, US hawks see the alliance between Israel and India as even more crucial for the success of their regional objectives.

India's relationship with Israel has traditionally been balanced against its need to retain goodwill with Muslim countries in the Middle East, specially the Gulf States. There are huge economic advantages in this for India, in terms of trade and export of manpower. Indeed, the number of Indian expatriates in the Gulf States far exceeds those from other countries and who, in turn, remit huge amounts of foreign exchange every year. But, because of the fast changing world order, and the historic opportunities now being presented, India is prepared to risk her relations with the Arab countries by finally bringing her ties with Israel out of the closet.

In early May, India's national security adviser, Brajesh Mishra, made an unprecedented appearance at the annual convention of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Quite ingeniously, and unilaterally, he made India a natural partner with the US and Israel in the fight against terror. He declared that all the three 'have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern day terrorism', adding that 'such an alliance would have the political will and moral authority to take bold decisions in extreme cases of terrorist provocation'.

He was clearly equating the US war against the Taliban with his own country's threatened attack on Pakistan in retaliation to what it had claimed to be a Pakistani inspired attack on its Parliament. The message was unambiguous: India must be given the 'political' and 'moral' authority to take 'bold decisions' (read 'attack Pakistan') in the

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event of any future terrorist provocation.

It is to India's great credit, or conversely a failure of Pakistan's foreign policy, that Pakistan's bloody dispute over Kashmir and decades of brutalisation of the Kashmiri Muslims has never impacted India's relationship with the Arab countries. It is also a sad commentary on the OIC, which has been ineffectual and cursory in dealing with the Kashmir issue. Besides passing inane resolutions requiring settlement of the dispute in accordance with appropriate UN resolutions, the OIC has done little else.

No one, least of all India, takes the OIC seriously. However, now that the other 'axis of evil' is rapidly taking shape, pointing a dagger at the very heart of the Islamic world, Muslim countries, and more specifically the Arab states, might perhaps take notice of the duplicitous role that India has played all along. While one may understand (though not condone) the weakness of Muslim countries in dealing with the US, there seems to be no justification in failing to clearly identify India as Israel's strategic partner.

When Arab states have for long persisted in their boycott of Israel, it is difficult to understand the logic of their cosy ties with India, even when there is no ambiguity in the nature and extent of its relationship with Israel? As a very minimum, Arab states can and should stop fuelling India's economy, which only helps her to make massive arms deals with Israel. If they are unable, or unwilling to call India's bluff, then surely there must be much veracity in the assertion that the Islamic world 'has a rotten socio-political system...lacks the will to defend itself...(and) is highly vulnerable to attack'. ■

The writer is a retired wing commander of the PAF.