

Strategy for the War on Terrorism

by Charles V. Peña

Because we use the shorthand phrase “war on terrorism” to describe the U.S. response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, it is easy to believe that this war, like all previous wars, can be won by simply killing the enemy—wearing them down until they are broken and capitulate. Given that suicide terrorists are, by definition, undeterrable, it seems that we have no choice but to kill them before they kill us.

This is a different kind of war that requires a different strategic approach. The core issue is the question raised by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in his now famous October 2003 leaked memo: “Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?” With more than a billion Muslims in the world, a strategy that focuses only on the former without addressing the latter is a losing strategy.

So what is a winning strategy?

In their book *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terrorism*, David Frum (former speechwriter for President Bush) and Richard Perle (former chairman of the Defense Policy Board under Bush) contend that evil is at the root of terrorism and propose that the United States focus on eradicating evil. But that is a quixotic quest that does not focus on the group responsible for the September 11 attacks. It is exactly that kind of logic that led the Bush administration to wage a war against Iraq, even though the White House has conceded that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11 and its allegations of linkages between the former regime in Baghdad and Al Qaeda are not conclusively proven.

Instead of embarking on another Iraq

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Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International* and a member of the international selection committee for the second Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, presents the prize to Hernando de Soto at a dinner in San Francisco on May 6. Story and photos, pp. 3, 18–19.

(in North Korea, Iran, or Syria), a strategy for the war on terrorism must focus on the real threat to the United States: Al Qaeda. Such a strategy would consist of three central elements, in ascending order of importance: homeland security against future terrorist attacks, dismantling and degrading the Al Qaeda terrorist network, and a foreign policy that does not needlessly create new terrorists.

Prioritizing Homeland Security

A paramount responsibility of the federal government as set forth in the Constitution is to “provide for the common defense.” The challenge of terrorism is illustrated in a statement by the Irish Republican Army after a failed attempt to kill British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in 1984: “Remember, we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always.” So homeland security starts with knowing that a perfect defense against terrorism is not possible.

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Accordingly, homeland security efforts must focus on the threats that pose the most catastrophic consequences and against which there are cost-effective defenses. First and foremost, that means not focusing on the last attack. The March 2004 Madrid train bombings are proof enough that we should not be obsessed with hijacked airplanes. And even with airplanes, hijackings are not the only terrorist threat; shoulder-fired missiles are a real threat to commercial airliners, and the effect of such a terrorist attack could be even more chilling for the airline industry and the economy than was September 11.

The first priority for homeland security must be to prevent terrorists from entering the country. That is the single most important thing that the Department of Homeland Security can do to reduce the likelihood of another terrorist attack. It is important to remember that all 19 hijackers entered the United States via known points of legal entry, as millions of visitors to the United States do annually. Therefore, we need to put systems and procedures in place to stop known or suspected terrorists at the border. The most crucial aspect is ensuring that information from the appropriate agencies (e.g., CIA, FBI, Interpol) about known or suspected terrorists is made directly available in real time to the people responsible for checking passports, visas, and other immigration information. What's really needed at the borders is a “Google search” that would check a person's name and passport number against U.S. and foreign terrorist databases.

In addition to dangerous people, homeland security must seek to prevent unauthorized dangerous cargo from entering the United States. Although much of such an effort needs to be directed at weapons of mass destruction, it would be a mistake to focus exclusively on actual *weapons* of mass destruction. Ships, trains, and trucks carrying hazardous materials could be potential bombs, as demonstrated by the foiled April 2004 terrorist plot in Jordan that involved truck bombs with 20 tons of chemicals and explosives. Of course, not every ship, train, or truck is a threat, and the need for security must be balanced by the need to ensure the free flow of goods, which is

vital to the health of the U.S. economy.

Homeland security must also focus on protecting potential targets against terrorist attack—acknowledging that there are too many targets to protect and myriad ways they can be attacked. We must prioritize targets to defend. For example, nuclear power plants would be lucrative targets, but it is not simply a matter of providing increased security. The first concern is to safeguard nuclear material so that it can't be stolen for building a weapon. Second, the power plant itself must be protected to prevent terrorists from creating a disaster along the lines of Chernobyl. Similarly, security for chemical and biological facilities must be designed to prevent terrorists from creating an accident such as the 1984 Union Carbide chemical pesticide plant accident in Bhopal, India, that killed more than 3,000 people.

Finally, homeland security officials must consider civil liberties implications. We must heed Benjamin Franklin's admonition that “they that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” Before the government infringes civil liberties, it must demonstrate that proposed new powers are essential, that they would be effective, and that there is no less invasive way to accomplish the same security goal.

Dismantling Al Qaeda

Although the United States must do everything it reasonably can to defend against future terrorist attacks, the war on terrorism cannot be fought solely as a defensive war. The United States must also aggressively seek out the terrorists who would do us harm. We must dismantle and degrade the Al Qaeda terrorist network. But we must first understand who the enemy is and what this so-called war is about. Not all Muslims are Al Qaeda. Not all terrorists are Al Qaeda. Not all Islamic fundamentalists are radical Islamists. In other words, we should not extend the terrorist threat beyond those who directly threaten the United States. We must be able to understand and make these distinctions to be able to differentiate between those who pose a genuine threat, those who pose little or no threat, and those who might be helpful. For example, as part of the war on

terrorism, the U.S. military is assisting the Philippine government against the Abu Sayef guerrillas. To be sure, some of the Abu Sayef may have graduated from Al Qaeda's Afghanistan training camps and there are some known contacts between Abu Sayef and Al Qaeda members. But the reality is that Abu Sayef is a separatist group of financially motivated kidnappers rather than radical Islamists who threaten the United States.

Part of the problem of using the phrase “war on terrorism” is that it implies the use of military force as a primary instrument of waging the war. But traditional military operations—such as Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan—will be the exception rather than the rule. Al Qaeda is not an army that wears uniforms and operates in a specific geographic region. Rather, it is a loosely connected and decentralized network with cells and operatives in 60 countries. So President Bush is right: “We'll have to hunt them down one at a time.”

That means that the work of dismantling and degrading the network will largely be the task of unprecedented international intelligence and law enforcement cooperation. The military role in the war on terrorism will be primarily special forces in discrete operations against specific targets.

It is also important to understand who the enemy is, which is a core dictum of Sun Tzu in the ageless classic of strategy and strategic thinking, *The Art of War*:

One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be in danger in a hundred battles.

One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes win, sometimes lose.

One who does not know the enemy and does not know himself will be in danger in every battle.

Understanding begins with knowing that taking out Al Qaeda's leadership will not be enough to destroy it. Such an approach may work for regime change in rogue states ruled by dictators, but it won't yield the same results against a distributed and adaptive terrorist organization. As elements of Al Qaeda's leadership have been either cap-

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tured or killed, new leaders have emerged. According to one U.S. intelligence official, “The strength of the group is they don’t need centralized command and control.” And without a single target (either an individual or part of the organization) within Al Qaeda, according to a senior U.S. official: “Now, instead of a large, fixed target we have little moving targets all over the world, all armed and all dangerous. It is a much more difficult war to fight this way.”

Thus, it is useful to visualize Al Qaeda’s structure as the honeycombs of a beehive—with the cells interconnected by multiple paths spread over disparate geographic locations and able to be reconstructed if they are damaged or destroyed. The task of dismantling the network will not be easy or quick; it will likely take many years.

We must also understand that Al Qaeda is more than just a terrorist organization; it is also an idea. The common misperception is that Al Qaeda’s war is against the United States. But the reality is that Al Qaeda’s struggle is not primarily against America but within the Muslim world. It is a struggle for the soul of Islam. Since the war is within the Muslim world (not the Muslim world vs. America), it may not be possible to “win” the war on terrorism in the traditional sense. But the United States could lose the war if by its policies and actions it creates the perception within the Muslim world that the war on terrorism is being waged against all Muslims and polarizes the more than one billion Muslims in the world to believe America is their enemy.

Al Qaeda’s ideology now has a life of its own. The U.S. preoccupation with Iraq for more than two years after September 11 (beginning with President Bush naming Iraq as a member of the “axis of evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union address) has given time and space for the cancer to spread, as well as a rallying cry to recruit more Muslims to Al Qaeda’s radical cause. According to Omar Bakri Mohammed, the London-based leader of the radical Islamic group al-Muhajiroun: “Al Qaeda is no longer a group. It’s become a phenomenon of the Muslim world resisting the global crusade

of the U.S. against Islam.” We know that Al Qaeda has become a franchise of sorts, bringing other radical Islamic groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, into its fold. But it also now appears that a “reverse franchise” effect may be taking place. That is, other groups may conduct terrorist attacks citing sympathy with Al Qaeda but without any direct connection to or contact with Al Qaeda. The November 2003 car bombings in Turkey (the Abu Hafs al Masri Brigades and Great Eastern Islamic Raider’s Front both claimed responsibility) and the March 2004 train bombings in Spain (the Abu Hafs al Masri Brigades claimed responsibility but the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group has been the primary target of the Spanish investigation) are signs of this phenomenon.

Changing U.S. Foreign Policy

Understanding the Al Qaeda threat also means challenging the conventional wisdom articulated by President Bush in the aftermath of September 11: “Why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government. They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

That’s a misleading analysis. Throughout the world, even the Muslim world, people admire and appreciate American accomplishments, culture, and values (including democracy and capitalism). But many of those people hate U.S. policies. Polls conducted throughout the world show that anti-Americanism is fueled more by what we do than who we are.

As a 1998 study for the Department of Defense reported, much of the anti-American resentment around the world, particularly the Islamic world, is the result of interventionist U.S. foreign policy. Such resentment is the first step to hatred, which can lead to violence, including terrorism. Therefore, the United States needs to stop meddling in the internal affairs of other countries and regions, except when they directly threaten U.S. national security interests, that is, when the territorial integrity, national sovereignty, or liberty of the United States is at risk. Put another way: Afghanistan was a necessary intervention,

because of the Taliban regime’s support for Al Qaeda, but Iraq was not.

Because the United States is in a unique geostrategic position with no rivals and relatively secure from conventional military attack, the guiding principle for U.S. foreign policy must be: if core U.S. national security interests—the American homeland, population, and way of life—are not threatened, the United States can minimize the risks of terrorism by being less involved in the problems of other countries. That is especially true in the Muslim world, most notably the Middle East.

Whatever the wisdom of invading Iraq and the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, this much should be clear now: Iraq is not a threat to U.S. national security today. With the exception of Al Qaeda infiltrators, the insurgents in Iraq are not a direct threat to the United States. Therefore, the United States must hand the government over to the Iraqi people, let them decide the form of a new government, and withdraw U.S. forces as expeditiously as possible. That would not be “cutting and running” but simply refocusing U.S. attention and resources to deal directly with the Al Qaeda threat.

There is only one reason why Saudi Arabia is treated as a close U.S. ally and accorded special status: oil. But the United States is not dependent on Saudi oil, and U.S. security interests are not at stake in Saudi Arabia. At best, the relationship is an alliance of convenience. At worst, it’s hypocritical to support an oppressive, theocratic monarchy. What the United States needs from the Saudis is not oil. Instead, we need the Saudis to crack down on the funding of madrassas that churn out radical Islamists.

It is certainly understandable that the United States would want to support Israel, a liberal democracy in the Middle East, but the reality is that Israeli security is not a U.S. national security problem. Neither is an Israeli-Palestinian peace necessary for U.S. security. U.S. interests would be better served by not becoming involved in a process that has little chance of succeeding. The United States should cut the more than \$2 billion in annual aid to Israel that is resented by many Palestinians because they believe it is used to underwrite Israeli military operations in the West Bank and Gaza, as well

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as allegedly for financing the establishment of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. (Similarly, the U.S. government should not aid the Palestinian Authority.) That would not make the United States any less of a friend to Israel, but it would eliminate a propaganda tool used by radical Islamists to recruit terrorists and avoid creating a situation where Israel's terrorist enemies have a reason to make America a target.

The United States gives Egypt more than \$2 billion a year in military and economic aid. But Egypt is an authoritarian regime that masquerades as a democracy, which provides volatile fuel for radical Islamists. U.S. support for Egypt foment anti-American attitudes that make the United States a target for terrorism. Similarly, Pakistan claims to be a democracy despite the fact that General Pervez Musharraf came to power by overthrowing a democratically elected (albeit unpopular) government and has used very undemocratic methods to control Pakistan. Yet Pakistan is considered a U.S. ally because Musharraf supports the war on terrorism—even while hailing A. Q. Kahn, the man responsible

for selling nuclear secrets to North Korea, Iran, and Libya, as a national hero. The Karimov government in Uzbekistan is a totalitarian secular state that represses all dissent, including religious expression amongst the Muslims who are 90 percent of the population. Like Pakistan, Uzbekistan has played the “terrorist card” to garner U.S. support.

Those are just three examples, but they highlight the problems associated with U.S. support for countries because they claim to be “pro-U.S.” or “anti-terrorist” without regard to whether their internal policies increase the risk of terrorism to the United States. Such support may be a necessary evil in the short term, but it should be narrowly focused, done only out of necessity, and of limited duration.

America should be wary about providing ongoing support to Muslim countries simply because they profess to be anti-terrorist. It is important to remember that when the United States supported undemocratic and unpopular regimes during the Cold War simply because they were friendly to us, and when those regimes

were overthrown, the results were often virulently anti-American successor governments (e.g., Iran and Nicaragua). Ultimately, U.S. support for countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan could end up doing more to breed terrorism than to prevent it.

In the final analysis, we cannot build a perfect defense against every potential terrorist attack, and it is unrealistic to believe that we can kill each and every Al Qaeda terrorist. No matter how successful the United States is in homeland security and dismantling Al Qaeda, it will not stop terrorism unless U.S. foreign policy changes. More than anything else, U.S. foreign policy is the cause of the virulent anti-Americanism that is the basis for terrorism. If we don't change U.S. foreign policy to stem the tide of growing anti-American sentiment overseas, particularly within the Muslim world, then the pool of terrorist recruits will grow and the United States will continue to be a target. Changing U.S. foreign policy may not guarantee victory in the war on terrorism, but not changing it will certainly spell defeat. ■

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