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9/11: Five years later -- Gauging Islamist Terrorism

Introduction

After five years of tremendous effort and expense rendered by the United States of America and our allies in the “global war on terror,” there has been some progress made in preventing follow-on terror attacks. Tactical victories have been secured by means of killing or capturing major terrorist planners and operators. Major military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown mixed results on terror threat. While the U.S. has “deprived al Qaeda of sanctuary in Afghanistan,”¹ the failure to commit sufficient troops and other resources now has the country heading back towards instability. A massive increase in opium production will increase finances for the Taliban and al Qaeda, while the reconstitution of the Taliban military capability has been a deeply unwelcome development. In Iraq, the U.S. executed what many will argue was the single most harmful act since September 11. While the invasion has put other nations on notice that any inkling of terror support will lead to its destruction, the war has provided terrorists with a major propaganda victory, a real-world training camp for terrorists and insurgents, while also dramatically altering the once-solid moral reputation of the United States.

Has Islamist terrorism been weakened?

In short, the answer to that question appears to be no. But more importantly, we need to recognize that it is not the right question to ask. One of the most significant shortcomings in our strategy for the “long war” continues to weaken us by misdirecting our resources and attention. There is little recognition and resulting policy that what we face is a widespread struggle within Islam, and that by definition the United States and Western forces are ill-equipped on multiple levels to confront and ultimately vanquish violent Islamist extremism. Terrorism is the tool used by these movements, and pursuing the actors, their sanctuaries, finances, and their weapons only treats the symptoms of a much larger problem for which we can only provide one small part of the solution. The movement’s components are part ideological, part religious, part social, part political.² The solutions include, first and foremost, working with and supporting local Muslim and Arab leaders while at the same time shifting emphasis away from our largely military-led response. Until this becomes a core component of our strategy, we will continue treading water.

Support for terrorism

¹ “Five Years After 9/11: Accomplishments and Continuing Challenges,” A reference document produced by the staff of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC. September 1, 2006.

² Anthony H. Cordesman, “Winning the ‘War on Terrorism:’ The Need for A Fundamentally Different Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies. Draft version, September, 2006, P. 3.

When you consider that extensive polling of foreign attitudes by the Pew Foundation shows record lows for respect and approval of the United States and our policies, it takes little convincing to claim that support for violent extremist groups and terrorism is easy to come by. In addition to be relatively inexpensive to plan and conduct a terror strike, the means of raising, laundering, and transferring that money are myriad. The informal banking system known as hawala alone suggests that we will never stop more than a fraction of the funds transferred between violent extremists and their supporters. The nexus between terrorism and crime has also narrowed. Terrorists are dominant in all manner of transnational crime, and the record opium crop in Afghanistan is a very sobering reminder of how hard the struggle is.

Europe has emerged as a major hub for violent extremist activity. Young men and some women among Europe's 15-20 million Muslims offer fertile ground for recruitment, planning, and support. In many Muslim and Arab countries, support comes from similar youth who ply neighborhoods where unemployment is high despite quality education. Compounding these economic conditions is the deterioration of traditional social structures, and the failure realize promises of political and social reform. Repression from leaders in Egypt, Uzbekistan and other nations is a major underpinning of the street-level support. Overall, sources of support have shifted from states to individuals, charities, business people, families, and tribal groups. Much of the support, as the hawala example shows, has gone underground in part because of strong finance measures and the threat of sanctions led by the United States.

The evolution and status of transnational terrorism and al Qaeda

It is well known at this point that violent extremism has spread significantly since September 11, and that the original core threat of al Qaeda has transformed from a central organization into a global, politico-religious, ideological movement. The emergence of self-starter groups has dominated the landscape of terrorism. They are inspired and motivated by events and the apparent confirmation of their "world view" that Islam is under attack and that they have a direct role in defending it. Al Qaeda, I believe, is still able to direct attacks. Al Qaeda may be reduced as a core, combat capable unit, but its planning and guidance functions remain, and its ideology is "mobile and potent."³ There is little evidence to date that the August 2006 London aircraft plot had direct al Qaeda control, but what is clear is that those arrested were inspired by Osama Bin Laden's agenda. It also appears to be the case that self-starters in Europe and elsewhere feel compelled to make a journey to Pakistan or Afghanistan -- not so much for training as for spiritual and moral support from those in or close to al Qaeda Central. This trend in and of itself is something to exploit.

Whether direct or indirect, bin Laden and his remaining confederates in "al Qaeda Central" are likely still able to develop and send details for attacks. Video and audio releases by al Qaeda's leadership remind followers that they are supported and expected to do their part in the global war against the "infidels." Instructions or the simple spiritual support for terrorist actions by widely scattered "self-starters" can be passed through a maze of human couriers, none of which is likely to betray bin Laden or the broader movement. These messages can then find their way to those who need it by phone, fax, email, CD/DVD, websites, or through traveling extremists and supporters. The options are numerous, and the countermeasures few.

³ Sydney Jones, International Crisis Group. New York Times video interview, Jakarta, Indonesia, August 4, 2006.

To be certain, there is some notable progress against extremist groups. In Indonesia, we have seen significant progress against the group al-Jemaah al-Islamiya (JI). Thanks in large part to Australian assistance, Indonesia has sent 200 suspects through a speedy, transparent and increasingly fair justice system.⁴ The JI threat has diminished, making Indonesia one of the bright spots. This case is a good example of the right approach: it must be local in nature, and involve empowering and assisting local leaders.

Addressing terrorism: policy priorities

The recent announcement by President Bush that the top operational leaders of the September 11 attacks will be brought to trial is an important step. For too long the U.S. has been crippled by the widespread perception that we do not hold ourselves to the highest legal standards of due process, right to counsel, and guaranteed minimum human rights. The flow of young men and women into the ranks of violent Islamist extremist organizations has continued unabated over the last five years in part due to this sinking moral image of the United States. The well-worn concept of “winning hearts and minds” is repeated for a reason: it is a core, indispensable part of the solution. But there is an important caveat here: we can never advertise our way out of this immense problem, we need our Muslim partners to lead the way. That will include subtle but strong pressure on leaders to enact genuine social, economic, and political reforms. Minimizing the appearance of outside direction or control is vital, it is too easy for extremists to make hay of American meddling. For too long we have been seen as the “power behind the power” in places such as Egypt, Jordan and Israel.

Top Middle East and terrorism expert Anthony Cordesman reminds us that what we confront are violent extremist movements that most often have a cause confined to a particular state. There is no overarching global, connected campaign against the U.S., but rather local battles that need to be treated on an individual basis. The factors that make up these struggles are ones with which the U.S. is unfamiliar and lacks significant understanding. They include social, religious, cultural, historical and ideological elements that Muslims and Arabs have an inherent understanding of. So if we hope for success, we must act in concert with our partners, and allow them to lead.

Some of our policies have been short-changed. There continues to be the widespread perception that the U.S. approach to the Israeli/Palestinian question has never been fair or intended to elicit real solutions. While untrue in many ways, perception is reality to those who support and take part in terror strikes. Equally as pressing as giving the Israeli/Palestinian problem our robust and determined attention, there remains a long-standing threat to our security, and in fact the world's security. Russian tactical nuclear weapons continue to be relegated to the backburner of policy priorities. If our leaders “don't want the next smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,” then why have we not made more progress in securing the thousands of remaining tactical nuclear weapons? Weapons of Mass Destruction demand immediate attention. After all, if our priority motivation for invading Iraq was to remove WMD, why are we not moving with dispatch to secure the thousands of known, functioning, transportable weapons in Russia that could fall prey to theft or smuggling? Some of our enemies are implacable and are driven by apocalyptic visions

⁴ Sydney Jones, Ibid.

of this confrontation. For them, nothing we do will matter. If given the opportunity to strike with WMD, they will do so.

What degree should "metrics" play in our strategy?

In such a multifaceted, transnational problem about which the U.S. only understands parts of, the use of metrics simply cannot be reliable. But there are some measurements that can offer us an indication trends and our security. In returning to the previous issue of Russia's "loose nukes" we could look at a decreasing number of available tactical warheads as encouraging. Nothing could change our way of life and the global economy more than the use of WMD, so their numbers and location should be monitored assiduously.

While not an entirely accurate barometer, it is clear that we will derive a good sense of where we figure in the struggle by monitoring public opinion in the Muslim world.⁵ While hard to quantify, the degree of social, political and economic reform in countries that produce many Islamist extremists would serve as an indicator of how the broader struggle to reduce the numbers, power and reach of these movements. Also, a reduction in the numbers of madrassas (Koranic schools) in Pakistan, the Philippines, and elsewhere would also be encouraging. Finally, a drop in terrorist incidents and the numbers of people killed can also serve as an indicator. But this factor cannot be relied on too heavily. While smaller actors and less ambitious plans may be foiled, the future "spectaculars" likely to be attempted by al Qaeda and other groups will be years in the making, and could surprise us just as we think the trend was turning positive.

Are government agencies properly structured to combat international terrorism?

A comprehensive assessment would be necessary to determine this, and I am doubtful that a successful one could be carried out. Competing interests that could lose influence and resources in still-needed restructuring will make many positive changes elusive. A review of law enforcement and regulatory agencies' transnational capabilities would provide insight and answers to this question. Jonathan Winer, an intelligence and money-laundering expert and attorney, who served previously as U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement, believes that measuring the degree to which the CIA, State Department, Pentagon and other relevant agencies are "now functioning on a trans-border basis as well as on a country basis"⁶ could indicate if restructuring has been successful. The failure to halt the attack narcotics trade in Afghanistan is also one metric that suggests that the U.S. government is paying insufficient attention to some of the most important issues.

In the recent report by the staff of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) asserts that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) "is a holding company, not an integrated department."⁷ There are very few people who would argue that DHS has enhanced America's overall security. Contacts throughout the national security and law enforcement community relay mixed messages about the structure of our agencies. I believe 75% of the

⁵ Interview with attorney Jonathan Winer, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Law Enforcement. September 4, 2006.

⁶ Jonathan Winer interview, September 4, 2006.

⁷ "Five Years After 9/11: An Assessment," CSIS Press, September 1, 2006

comments I hear are negative, with most of it directed towards DHS and the FBI. There is also disbelief and discouragement over the role of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and its increasing size. But most of all, it is the Pentagon's trump card over the DNI that causes most people to shake their heads. A late addition to the legislation creating that office provided that "the authorities granted to the Director of National Intelligence...respects and does not abrogate the statutory responsibilities of the heads of the departments of the United States Government concerning such departments." Many intelligence experts and officials felt this dealt a crippling blow to the DNI's authority and ability to manage the 16 member intelligence community to the degree necessary for real change and effectiveness.

Some reforms of the intelligence community are still underway, and thus it is very difficult to measure their progress. CIA analysts indicate that morale is low as they lose staff to the National Counterterrorism Center, which according to several people is "winning" that internal struggle.

What constitutes victory in the "GWOT" and what is a reasonable timeframe for success?

Success will be determined in many ways. A reduction in the number of recruits to carry out violent action in support of extremist ideologies stands as one of the most important. But getting there will be tremendously difficult. We will have to rely on some degree of internal dissolution as this movement is too complex and resilient to die U.S. hands alone.

The term war is debilitating. Yes, in the first few days it was helpful in rallying the U.S. public and some of our allies, but it now hinders our response. It is an abrasive term for allies who don't see the threat as existential, and whose publics know a very different reality of war. The "war" is off-putting to many Americans who believe it allows for an open-ended timeframe and too much latitude for U.S. government responses on our own soil and overseas. Others feel it is totally appropriate and support it wholeheartedly. There is clear evidence that being on a war footing has weakened our cause: witness our posture towards battlefield prisoners, Abu Ghraib, secret prisons, Guantanamo. This caused deep and widespread damage to our reputation, and motivated huge numbers of people to join the fight against America.

When Muslim and Arab leaders are fair and responsive to their populations, we can expect an increased chance of peace and security. Whether a war or a campaign or a long struggle, we are in it and it will take a long time to arrive at a sense of victory or at least security...if ever. Internal forces and actors will determine the duration of this battle, and less so U.S. actions. It merits repeating that the U.S. can only hasten the dissolution of Islamist extremism to a small degree – the burden is on Muslims and the capabilities are with the local political, religious and intellectual leaders from Arab and Muslim nations.

To many of the actors we confront, the U.S. represents a target's bulls eye. We are the "far enemy" with the highest point value. But the battles are to be won country by country and by an array of moderate forces and influences within national borders. Outside influence, especially if driven by the U.S. military or government, will fail if not conducted with the utmost care and respect. Osama Bin Laden believes America will be the second domino to fall after the Soviet Union, and that he and his movement are significantly responsible for this. They think America can be defeated.

What is the proper balance between civil liberties and aggressively checking terrorism?

Jim Fallows, National Correspondent of the Atlantic, notes that America's biggest threat is not what al Qaeda can do to us, but what we will do to ourselves in response to the threat. There is certain truth to this, and I believe that we have suffered as a country when actions were taken in haste or without the participation of Congress.

There can be no doubt that terrorists are using technology that at times exceeds our own surveillance capabilities and countermeasures, and which exploits our rules governing investigations and monitoring. We should not fail to change these laws and respond to the enemy's tactics as soon as possible. But because we are a nation of laws and importantly because Congress has a constitutional role in formulating or amending them, any changes should be made with its participation, even if kept secret from the general public. As of now, and due to the secret and complex nature of intelligence, it is unclear whether the current tradeoff between civil liberties and security is even knowable or quantifiable. And there are a number of different opinions on this subject. There does seem to be room for compromise. Many people I have spoken to on both sides of the issue agree on two basic points: changes have to be made to our laws, but they must be done through proper channels and with sufficient consideration of their long term effect.

Attorney Jonathan Winer fairly asks "what is the evidence that any particular reduction in civil liberties has led to any reduction in the terrorist threat?" With regard to the NSA wiretapping controversy, little evidence appears to support the notion that court orders were not necessary. On the issue of torture and in reflection of U.S. human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, it is widely known that prisoners offer false testimony simply to stop the torture. Ultimately, Mr. Winer believes that "civil liberties do not have to be infringed to check terrorism. Traditional military and law enforcement and regulatory techniques, updated to reflect technological changes, are sufficient."

Are Iran and Hezbollah more of a threat than Al Qaeda?

Recent hostilities in the Middle East serve as a sober reminder that Hezbollah and its state sponsor Iran pose serious threats to the region and possible to the United States. Iran's apparent efforts to build a nuclear arsenal is an ominous development. Combining Iranian President Ahmadinejad's threat to "wipe Israel off the map" with Israel's well known policy of preemptively striking core national security threats, there is trouble not far over the horizon.

Iran clearly presents a number of problems for the United States, our allies and nations the Persian Gulf region. Others, though believe that Iran is simply acting in its own interests and that such moves do not constitute a fundamental threat. In so far as Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons upsets the balance of power in the region, this is clearly another issue. In addition to Israel's reaction, Saudi Arabia and Egypt may feel compelled to sharply increase their military capabilities and to possibly pursue nuclear weapons.

Before al Qaeda's September 11 attack, Hezbollah killed more Americans than any other terrorist group. Hezbollah's relative success during the recent fighting in Lebanon is a problem for the U.S. and for states around the world. The terrorist group's ability to stop the Israeli army

and to sustain withering air strikes provided it with real legitimacy by demonstrating the power of transnational, sub-state movements. Any strike on Iran is likely to be met with the unleashing of Hezbollah on U.S. targets throughout the region and possibly the world. Hezbollah's far flung global operations, led by Imad Mughniyah, have been found in Argentina, Europe, the U.S. (North Carolina), Australia, and Africa's Gulf of Guinea, among other places.⁸ Iran's (and Syria's support of Hezbollah is common knowledge.

What could be done to better attack the ideology fueling Islamist terrorism?

Returning to the insights of Anthony Cordesman, the threat of Islamic extremism is a national phenomenon that can best be met through local forces on a country-by-country basis, and not through a "globally connected effort." Cordesman notes

...the real war on terrorism can only be won within Islam and at a religious and ideological level. This does not mean that improving every aspect of counterterrorism at the national, regional and global level is not important. It does mean that no amount of outside action by the United States, Europe or non-Islamic states can do more than partially contain the violence. It is only the religious, political and intellectual leaders of Islamic countries and communities, particularly in the Arab world, that can successfully engage and defeat Islamic extremism at a religious, intellectual, political and cultural level.⁹

Recognizing that insight, there are nonetheless a number of actions the United States can take, and actions we can avoid. With costs for the Iraq war running at \$5 billion per month, the U.S. can certainly spend a fraction of that to improve social services to Muslims in a number of countries, and thus rebuild the foundation of goodwill. Imagine what the construction of 10 U.S. hospital ships similar to the USNS *Mercy* would do to the U.S. standing. These ships would be staffed with, among others, Muslim doctors from around the world, to provide thousands of people with free access to vital medical care. A lot of news is made of individual Iraqi children who are flown to the U.S. for special medical procedures, so imagine the impact of placing these hospital ships on rotation the world over. The ships would become iconic, and the U.S. would be remembered for its generosity as it was in post-war Europe and as we are now in post-tsunami Indonesia.

Another helpful policy can include promoting tolerant Muslim leaders in any country they are found, and arresting those who spew intolerant hate speech and support terrorist operations. One major component of U.S. efforts to counter extremist ideologies has been to promote democratic rule. This is a risky and sometimes ineffective policy for a number of reasons. First, Western

⁸ Lebanese brothers Chawki and Mohamad Hammoud were convicted of selling cigarettes purchased in North Carolina and sold over state lines in Michigan and Maryland and then using the proceeds to purchase night-vision goggles, mine detection equipment, laser designators, GPS equipment, and blasting caps. This "material support to terrorists" made its way to the Hezbollah-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. Hezbollah operatives, with the support of Iran, were responsible for the 1992 and 1994 bombings of Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Hezbollah has also been active in the "blood diamond trade in West Africa. And in Australia, Hezbollah has recruited members from the region and raised money from an often unwilling Lebanese immigrant community.

⁹ Cordesman, "Winning the 'War on Terrorism:' The Need for A Fundamentally Different Strategy" P. 3

values, however wonderful we believe and know they are, are often unwelcome and not transferable to many people. It may be a disappointing reality, but a reality nonetheless. In places with a history of democracy or a willingness to consider it, it has to be preceded by political reform to help adjust cultural and social attitudes and civic structures. As with medicine, improper dosage can be harmful.

Greater efforts to partner with Muslim and Arab countries on a range of scientific, medical, cultural, technological, business and academic initiatives can do much to reduce the widespread sense of Muslim loss and disrespect. In addition to bringing leaders from these fields to the United States, we in turn should make every effort to enable American students and scholars to spend time in those same countries. Not only will these exchanges build goodwill and understanding, but we will also establish a generation of people with the cultural awareness and language skills needed in the event of future hostilities (too Machiavellian?) ;)

Five years from now, what will we see?

2006 arrived very quickly, and I don't think many America citizens or their leaders are very happy with where we are. 2011 will arrive just as quickly, and serious thought and effort needs to go into plans and policies to make sure we don't feel as insecure then as we do now.

Some of the more ominous questions we may be asking include

1. Why didn't we make loose Russian nuclear weapons our core, number one priority?
2. How did we allow Afghanistan to be retaken by a combined Taliban/al Qaeda force?
3. How is it that Hezbollah gained control of most of Lebanon?
4. How is it that we allowed the emergence of a "mini-Iranian protectorate" that wound up controlling much of Iraq's oil revenues in what emerged as the independent, free Islamic State of Iran?
5. Why did we think the Muslim Brotherhood would remain a moderate force in Egypt once they took control of the country and the military following the deposing of President Hosni Mubarak?
6. And how could we have possibly failed to block a fundamentalist takeover of Saudi Arabia by neo-Salafi/Wahabbi clerics?
7. With Iran in possession of nuclear weapons and sufficient ballistic missile capabilities, what leverage is there against their emboldened theocracy and clerical leadership that provides support for Islamist extremist movements across Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Northern Africa, Canada, Latin America?
8. "Why are our soldiers still in Iraq? And what do we have to show for \$400 billion and 5,000 Americans dead?"
9. Why did we trade our cherished, hard-won civil rights for an ill-defined level of security?
10. Why are our traditional allies no longer our friends, and why are our new allies the kinds of countries we confronted during the Cold War?
11. Why did we not pressure secular, one-party Muslim regimes to reform?
12. Why didn't we put all of our energy into the extremists' number one recruitment issue: the Israeli/Palestinian problem?
13. Why are there so few Americans in foreign countries, and why are so many openly attacked when they are there?
14. Why have we closed so many embassies?

15. What more could we have done to keep Pakistan from being taken over by pro-Islamist generals?

More encouraging questions may be

1. How did America help local Muslim and Arab leaders successfully confront Islamic extremists in their countries?
2. How were Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri finally killed and where were they living?
3. Why didn't we begin the highly successful 2007 "Bush Plan" that invested money and time into massive, widespread provision of social and economic services to Muslims in at risk nations?
4. What other nations might become relative success stories like Afghanistan?
5. How many more American Information Centers will we re-open on Muslim countries this year?
6. On which day this year will the 100,000th foreign Muslim student begin school in America, and when will their American counterpart arrive in their country?

Conclusion

Administration officials are in fact speaking of the struggle against violent Islamist extremism as the "long war." And it is true that the enemy's proven ability to successfully adapt to our countermeasures signals that several more cycles of action/reaction will dot the horizon. But there is much that other nations and the United States have to do before this struggle's outcome is no longer in doubt. During the Cold War the United States and our allies built tremendous military, intelligence, academic, and economic capabilities to confront and eventually prevail against a totalitarian adversary. Today, we boast few of these capabilities. We do not speak radical Islam's language, understand their culture and history, nor can we pretend to solve their problems with military or other means. The role to be played by Muslim and Arab leaders in countries where these struggles within Islam and with secular leaders are taking place will be paramount. As soon as the United States begins this wholesale shift in emphasis, the sooner we will be re-opening those American Cultural Centers.