

Fighting the War on Terrorism: A Better Approach

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Counterterrorism will be a top concern of any future administration. Unfortunately, though the criticism of the Bush administration's policies is heated, critics have not offered serious alternatives. This paper tries to build on the strong points of the Bush administration's approach while offering alternatives for areas where it is wanting.

WHAT IS U.S. POLICY?

The U.S. strategy for fighting terrorism is both shifting and vague, but five elements stand out:

- First, the U.S. seeks to **destroy and disrupt al-Qa'ida and its affiliates**, commonly through the use of intelligence and law enforcement services.
- Second, the U.S. **opposes states that sponsor terrorists or offer them sanctuary**. Uncooperative regimes, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, will be coerced, or if necessary toppled.
- Third, there is a particular effort to **prevent terrorist groups from acquiring weapons of mass destruction**.
- Fourth, the U.S. has begun a relatively weak but by historical standards significant effort to **promote democracy** in the Middle East.
- Finally, **much of counterterrorism policy is now bound up in Iraq**.

HOW TO DO BETTER

The Bush administration has scored several important successes, particularly in the toppling of the Taliban and the global intelligence and law enforcement effort against al-Qa'ida and its affiliates. The U.S. should expand cooperation with allied security services and improve its defenses to contain the terrorists while using military force to bolster these measures. In the long-term, the terrorists' own weaknesses will come to the fore—something we can encourage by working to delegitimize them as well. Within this overarching framework, the U.S. should look at six “fronts” that are vital to success.

1. Intelligence

It is a cliché that intelligence is at the core of successful counterterrorism but, like many clichés, it needs nuance when applied in practice.

- The brouhaha over the lack of U.S. assets (e.g. a spy in Bin Ladin's inner circle) has created unrealistic expectations about what intelligence can accomplish against terrorist groups.
- **Most valuable intelligence assets will be controlled by liaison partners in the Muslim world.** U.S. operations that risk this cooperation should be avoided.
- The priority for U.S. intelligence should be coordinating allied activity and ensuring that the information they provide us is complete and accurate.
- The Bush administration's prioritization of the nexus between counterterrorism and WMD should be continued. **Pakistan should be given particular scrutiny.**

2. Military

A primary military role is to **prevent the emergence of another Taliban-type sponsor**, particularly one such as Pakistan that has access to nuclear weapons or Saudi Arabia which controls a critical resource and has considerable wealth. **Targeted killings** are also an appropriate use of military force, though they should be used sparingly. **Training allies for counterinsurgency** is also vital given the role insurgencies play in the global *jihadist* movement. **Limited military strikes usually fail and often backfire.** Attacks in 1986 on Libya and in 1998 on Afghanistan worsened terrorism.

3. Diplomacy

Allies are vital for counterterrorism, but what we ask of them is quite different from what was asked of traditional alliance partners during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. **For purposes of the war on terrorism, the most important new partners are India, Indonesia, and Pakistan.** Afghanistan, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen also are newly important. Britain, Canada, Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey remain important allies, while China, Japan, and South Korea all matter less than before when the U.S. focus is on al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

- Much of this cooperation will not have the degree of institutionalization that characterized alliances like NATO during the Cold War.
- Efforts to strengthen local regimes' counterterrorism capacities may inhibit democratic reform.
- U.S. cooperation with allies involved in their own struggles with Islamist groups will incur the opprobrium associated with their unpopular measures, such as Israel's activities in Palestine and Russia's repression in Chechnya.

4. Homeland Defense

U.S. homeland defense is poorly coordinated internally and not well integrated into the rest of the national security bureaucracy. Much of the spending is merely pork-barrel politics masquerading as security.

- A first step is to develop broad agreement on which targets will be protected and the methodology for evaluating tradeoffs. Right now, the U.S. does not focus carefully on targeting from a *jihadist* perspective.
- A homeland information strategy is vital. Far more economic (and perhaps human) damage may be done in the reaction to an attack than the attack itself.

5. Democratic Reform

Democratic reform has some benefits for counterterrorism, but it can weaken regimes while simultaneously empowering anti-U.S. forces.

- For now, the U.S. should build institutions and strengthen pro-U.S. voices.
- If a country is undergoing a democratic transformation (e.g. Indonesia), the U.S. should strive to support it, as the risks of failure can be considerable.

6. War of Ideas

The U.S. effort to win over Muslim (particularly Arab) hearts and minds has failed singularly.

- Rather than trying to build up America's image, we should undertake the easier and more productive task of tearing down the *ihadists*.
- The U.S. should emphasize local themes and give more control to country teams in Embassies: what works in Morocco may not work in Indonesia.

7. Iraq

The Bush administration argues that the U.S. presence in Iraq diverts terrorists from attacking the U.S. homeland, that success in Iraq would foster good governance that would decrease terrorism in general, and that al-Qa'ida affiliates would control Iraq if the U.S. departed. All these arguments are at best overstated and at worse flat wrong.

In reality, Iraq is a no-win situation for the broader struggle against terrorism. Each day the U.S. stays in Iraq is a boon for al-Qa'ida and the broader *ihadist* movement. A U.S. withdrawal that left Iraq in chaos, however, would also be a boon for al-Qa'ida: it would allow the *ihadists* to claim a great victory and, more importantly, risks recreating a large haven for the movement and allows them to strike Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other states in the region.

The most feasible approach that would entail realistic and tolerable sacrifices for the U.S. may be a limited drawdown, with the U.S. retaining a small conventional force presence (much of which could be deployed outside Iraq) and a significant covert and training capability.

- Much of this presence would be focused on containing the *ihadists* in Iraq.
- The U.S. must also hedge against the possibility that unrest will spread beyond Iraq.

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