

THE WAR ON TERROR, 2001-PRESENT

I. THE THREAT OF WMD TERROR: KEY QUESTIONS

- A. How great is the threat of WMD terror attacks, or other mass-killing terrorist attacks (e.g., attacks on chemical plants or nuclear plants)? How can this threat be measured? Experts disagree! Some say the threat is minor (John Mueller, Ian Lustick), others believe it is immense and immanent (Graham Allison). How can we tell who is right?
- B. How should this threat be addressed? What strategy is best?

II. AL QAEDA IN CONTEXT

Before 1993 terror experts believed that terrorist groups had limited aims--Brian Jenkins said terrorists wanted "a lot of people watching not a lot of people dead"--and they were too incompetent to conduct large-scale mass-casualty attacks.

The 1993 al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and the 1994/95 Aum Shinrikyo attacks in Tokyo showed that some terrorists aspire to immense killing.

The 2001 World Trade Center attack by al-Qaeda showed that some terror groups are capable of large-scale well-coordinated global attacks, hence of killing on a grand scale in the US.

Its past statements and actions indicate that al-Qaeda seeks to wreak large mayhem in the U.S. The late al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden (1988-2011) proclaimed that "to kill Americans ... civilian and military--is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible."¹ His former press spokesman, Suleiman Abu Ghaith, claimed a right for al-Qaeda to kill four million Americans, including two million children.² His operatives sought to acquire nuclear weapons during the 1990s.

III. ORIGINS OF AL-QAEDA: WAR CAUSES TERROR / FAILED STATES CAUSE TERROR

- A. War causes terror (an argument by Stephanie Kaplan):

Osama Bin Laden formed al-Qaeda in Pakistan in 1988 by combining Arabs who had volunteered to aid the Afghan side in the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89). Specifically, al-Qaeda combined Egyptian followers of Egyptian Islamist ideas (Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb) with Saudi followers of Wahhabism, a hateful and xenophobic Saudi Islamic sect.

Al-Qaeda has since been fed by the Afghan civil war (1989-1996), the India-Pakistani conflict, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Russian war in Chechnya, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the 2011 US invasion of Libya, the Syrian civil war of 2011ff, and the Somali civil war of ~1980sff. Al-Qaeda feeds on war!

- B. Failed states cause terror

¹ In 1998, quoted in Anonymous, Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002): 59.

² Graham Allison, Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe (New York: Times Books, 2004): 12.

Failed states (states that cannot control their territory) have multiplied in number in recent decades.

Al Qaeda infests failed states: Afghanistan in the 1990s; Yemen; Somalia; Iraq; Syria; Libya; Mali; Nigeria; Chechnya; and Pakistan (a semi-failed state).

IV. AL-QAEDA IDEOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

A. Al-Qaeda ideology

Al-Qaeda seeks to restore the Muslim world to the purity of the seventh century. Toward this it seeks to remove corrupt secular Arab rulers (e.g., Mubarak and Sisi in Egypt, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, and the Saudi monarchy); to eliminate western influence that it believes sustains these corrupt rulers; and to liberate "Muslim lands" now under non-Muslim rule. These "Muslim lands" include any places that were once governed by Muslim rulers (Spain, southern France, Israel, Greece, the Balkans) or by rulers that paid tribute to Muslim Caliphs (Russia).

After the Soviet ouster from Afghanistan Bin Laden's prime target became the United States--the "far enemy." He believed this "far enemy" sustained the "near enemy" (the corrupt Arab regimes), so the far enemy had to be beaten to defeat the near enemies.

Al-Qaeda thinking follows the "jihadi" or "harabi" worldview propounded by Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, drawing on ibn Taymiyya. It is reinforced by Saudi Arabia's export of its xenophobic version of Islam--Wahhabism--throughout the Mideast since 1962. It contorts Muslim scripture and tradition to allow the spreading of Islam by force and the killing of non-combatants. (Both are forbidden by mainstream Muslim traditions.)

B. The al-Qaeda historical narrative

Al-Qaeda's narrative is compelling but essentially false. It claims that the last century has seen vast unprovoked one-way violence by the U.S. and other western states against Muslims, who themselves were peaceful. In fact Muslims and non-Muslims have both committed great crimes against the other. Islamic Sudan slaughtered two million non-Muslim South Sudanese (1983-2006), Sudan supports the murderous Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Islamic Indonesia murdered 200,000 Christian East Timorese (1975-2000) and 400,000-500,000 of its Chinese minority (1965), and Islamic Turkey murdered ~1,000,000 Christian Armenians in 1895 and 1915. Muslims have also killed many Muslims, including: Saddam Hussein's mass killings of Kurds, Shias, and others (totalling perhaps 400,000-500,000 Iraqis killed), Hafez Assad's 1982 slaughter at Hama and Bashar Assad's more recent slaughter of Syrian civilians, the vast crimes of the Islamists in Algeria since 1992, and the Iran-Iraq war. Muslim extremists make a weak case when they demand vengeance against others for committing deeds they tolerate among themselves.

The Qur'an says: **"Believers, if an evil-doer brings you a piece of news, inquire first into its truth, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."** (Qur'an, 49:6). Perhaps this is the basis for a dialogue to narrow differences about history.

C. Al-Qaeda complained of four specific US policies before/after the 9/11/01 attack:

- > U.S. support for corrupt authoritarian Arab regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere.
- > U.S. economic sanctions on Iraq after 1991, which it alleged (I think wrongly) had killed many innocents.
- > U.S. troops stationed in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait after 1991. This was declared a sacrilege by al-Qaeda.
- > US backing for Israel. Al-Qaeda seeks to destroy Israel, and complains against all US aid to Israel. Other Arabs grudgingly accept Israel but oppose its continuing occupation/control of Palestinian lands. The U.S. has given large aid to Israel (~\$3 billion per year) while Israel has exported settlers (now numbering over 600,000) into the conquered Arab territories. U.S. aid to Israel is essentially unconditional, so these Arabs see the U.S. as backing Israeli colonization of Arab lands. This warms them to al-Qaeda's anti-Israel stance.

V. AL-QAEDA ATTACKS, US RESPONSES; AL-QAEDA TODAY

- A. Al-Qaeda's major attacks on western targets: the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, killing 6 people; a failed 1994 attempt to destroy 11 airliners over the Pacific ocean; the August 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 212 Africans and 12 Americans; a failed January 1, 2000 attack on the Los Angeles airport and hotels in Jordan; the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, killing 43 US military personnel; the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, Pentagon and (probably) Congress, killing 2996 people; a 2002 attack in Bali Indonesia, killing 202 people; the 2004 train bombing in Madrid that killed 191 people; the 2005 attack in London that killed 52 people; and the 2015 attack on the staff of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. Al-Qaeda has also attacked many Muslim targets in the Middle East and North Africa, killing thousands.
- B. US responses: the U.S. struck back at al-Qaeda's Afghan bases with cruise missiles in August 1998, and ousted the Afghan Taliban regime that protected it in October 2001. The US mounted large-scale drone attacks against al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan starting in 2009, decimating the AQ leadership. US special forces killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011.
- C. Al-Qaeda today.
 1. The al-Qaeda central command in Pakistan, now led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, has been badly weakened by US drone strikes and US efforts to isolate it from its worldwide friends. However, al-Qaeda franchises have sprung up in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, and the Sinai. Of these groups only the Yemen franchise ("Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula," or AQAP) now aspires to strike the US, but this could change.
 2. An al-Qaeda spinoff, ISIS (or ISIL), seized large territories in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and murdered many there. It is now much reduced and its state will soon be destroyed, but it will likely survive as a dangerous underground force.
 4. The Afghan Taliban, a past al-Qaeda ally, remains strong in Afghanistan. Three jihadi groups--the Pakistani Taliban, Jaish-e-Muhammed and Lashkar-e-Toiba--remain active in Pakistan.

5. The al-Qaeda narrative remains widely believed in the Muslim world.

VI. PRINCIPLES OF COUNTER-TERROR

Counter-terror is a war of intelligence, and a war of ideas, not a war of firepower.

Terrorists that can be found can be neutralized; finding them is the hard part.

Terrorists are sustained by popular support. They can be defeated only when their narrative is defeated; probably not before.

VII. U.S. COUNTER-AL-QAEDA STRATEGY: A WAR ON TOO FEW FRONTS?

A. Consider 12 possible missions that a counter-terror strategy might include. Both the Bush 43 and Obama administrations, but especially Bush 43, were criticized for focusing unduly on the first mission while neglecting others.

1. **The military/intelligence offensive.** Go abroad and roll up al-Qaeda's organization and sanctuaries, using intelligence and military force. Two approaches are debated:
 - a. Use US forces to destroy and replace regimes that give sanctuary to al-Qaeda, and to strengthen regimes that are willing to suppress al-Qaeda that inhabits their territory. Example: the US destroyed and replaced the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, then worked to build up an anti-Taliban Afghan government.
 - b. Attack al-Qaeda organizations directly, using drones, local allies, and US special forces, without replacing the regimes of the states they inhabit. Examples: Obama waged an intense drone (Predator/Reaper) war against al-Qaeda and Taliban militants in Pakistan. In Somalia, Yemen and Syria the U.S. has moved against al-Qaeda affiliates with drones and through proxies, while working around weak or uncooperative local regimes. Few U.S. troops were put on the ground to do this.

Both Bush 43 and Obama focused on the offensive. This offensive had some successes (destroying the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Islamic State's proto-state in 20015-17) but also failures (the escape of al-Qaeda's leadership from Tora Bora in Afghanistan in late 2001, the Taliban resurgence after 2006, the survival of al-Qaeda franchises in Yemen, Mali, Libya and elsewhere, and the rise of ISIS).

The Trump administration has continued this emphasis on offense.

2. **The defensive.** U.S. borders remain quite open. U.S. nuclear reactors and chemical plants remain inviting targets for terrorists. U.S. ports remain open to devastating attack. U.S. biodefenses have been strengthened but the U.S. remains vulnerable to bioterror. U.S. insurance laws governing terror give businesses little incentive to harden their infrastructure against terror.
3. **Lock down loose nuclear weapons, materials, and scientists.** Bush 41, Bill Clinton, and Bush 43 all moved to lock down

loose nuclear and biological materials and scientists in Russia and elsewhere, but slowly. Most are now secured but not all.

4. **Wage a war of ideas.** To defeat al-Qaeda the U.S. must change the terms of debate in the Muslim world. The key tool: Public diplomacy, or "counter-narrative" efforts.

U.S. public diplomacy efforts have been half-hearted. Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa, the main public diplomacy broadcast projects, are ineffective. The Voice of America Arab language service was closed. (!)

5. **End inflammatory conflicts that feed al-Qaeda.** Al-Qaeda feeds on war, especially wars involving Muslims. Perhaps the US should work to end such conflicts. They include: the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the India-Pakistan conflict, and the Afghan and Syrian civil wars.

To end the Israel-Palestinian conflict: some suggest the U.S. should frame its own final-status peace plan and coerce both sides toward it with carrots and sticks.

Regarding Kashmir and Iraq: same idea? Frame a final status agreement and use carrots and sticks to push both sides toward it.

6. **Save or resuscitate failed states? or develop a strategy to intervene against terrorists in such states?** This issue was much-debated regarding Afghanistan. Should the U.S. try to resuscitate the Afghan state? Or ignore the Afghan state, and intervene directly against the Taliban if it grows too strong or behaves too badly.

Additional possible missions:

7. Spread democracy, destroy authoritarian rule in the Muslim world.
8. End poverty, bring prosperity to the Muslim world, ROW.
9. Get the US out of the Middle East--pull US troops from the Mideast region? (Robert Pape recommends.) And/or reduce or cut US ties with Israel?
10. Deny financing to terrorists by counter-finance activity. Deny terrorist organizations other means of sustenance, whatever they might be,
11. Deny terrorists communication space.
12. Negotiation/deterrence/appeasement?? Make terrorists become more benign??

What research is needed on these or other missions?

- B. Is policy innovation required to address the WMD terror threat? Some argue that the U.S. should put relatively less resources into traditional military functions--army, navy, air force--and more resources into counterterror functions, including public diplomacy, diplomacy to lock down loose nukes and bioweapons around the world, and nation building/saving failed states.

VIII. THE LONG RUN: TWO SCARY TRENDS RAISE RISKS OF WMD TERROR

- A. Violent religious fundamentalism is rising in many religious communities. This raises the danger that more al-Qaedas could someday be born.

Millennarian fundamentalism is especially dangerous and has

increased markedly among Muslims, Christians, Jews and Buddhists over the past 15 years. (See Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, The Age of Sacred Terror [2002.])

- B. Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology and knowledge are spreading relentlessly.
 - 1. Weapons of mass destruction are growing more accessible to terrorists as technology advances and technical knowledge disperses.
 - a. The price of making WMD falls steadily as technology advances until it becomes affordable by terrorists.
 - b. The internet has a worrying downside. It enables groups with only rudimentary research skills to quickly learn how to assemble and use WMD.
 - 2. Nuclear proliferation, e.g., to Pakistan in the 1990s and North Korea today, creates more opportunities for bad actors to buy or steal nuclear weapons or materials.
- C. The spread of bioweapons and the resulting risk of bioterror pose a growing danger. (Discussed in our previous class on national security policy.)

Some, including myself, were lulled about the bioterror danger before 9/11/01 because the United States and most other major powers were uninterested in developing bioweapons. (The U.S. abandoned its offensive bioweapons program in 1969). We inferred from this that bioweapons weren't very useful and so wouldn't be developed or used. But while bioweapons may be unuseful to **states**, they are very useful to **terrorists** who seek vast destruction instead of finite military objectives. The appearance of skilled terrorist groups that aspire to mass murder, like al-Qaeda, means that a new class of potential bioweapons users has appeared. These weapons now have customers!

Many were also lulled by the world's success in surviving the nuclear revolution. They assumed that nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons were all of a piece--all were "weapons of mass destruction"--and that measures that worked with one (arms control, deterrence) would work with all three. But, as noted last week, bioweapons are far to control by agreement than nuclear weapons and their use is harder to deter. This is because bioweapons are more likely to be obtained by non-deterrable terrorists and arms control to halt their spread is far harder.

(See writing by MIT grad Greg Koblenz on these issues.)

IX. GOOD ANSWERS ARE HARD TO FIND!

One answer: Isolationism toward the world and Stalinism with a democratic face at home in the U.S. Tight surveillance of all human activity by a vastly increased state security apparatus. A grim specter.

Another answer: end scientific progress. Abolish MIT. Anybody got better ones?

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