FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY

49. Dismantling Al Qaeda

Policymakers should

- remember that the joint resolution approved by the Senate and the House of Representatives authorized the president ''to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001,'' not to wage an amorphous war on terrorism or evil or to unnecessarily conflate the terrorist threat with rogue regimes that seek weapons of mass destruction;
- focus the war on terrorism only on the Al Qaeda terrorist network and not expand it to other groups or countries that have not attacked, or do not represent a direct terrorist threat to, the United States;
- finish the job of aggressively hunting down Al Qaeda's leadership that fled to Pakistan from Afghanistan;
- recognize that much of the war on terrorism will not involve large-scale military action but will emphasize diplomatic, intelligence, and law enforcement cooperation with other countries;
- work with foreign governments to apprehend Al Qaeda operatives in other countries;
- approve the use of U.S. Special Forces for specific operations against Al Qaeda operatives when foreign governments are unable or unwilling to take action themselves; and
- make domestic counterterrorism to find Al Qaeda operatives in the United States the top priority for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

A Different Kind of War

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

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to believe that this war—like all previous wars—can be won simply by 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.

We call it a ''war on terrorism,'' but a more correct description would be a ''war against the terrorists who attacked the United States on September 11, 2001.'' It might even be called the ''un-war'' because it is unlike any previous war we've fought. Our enemy does not wear uniforms or command military forces. It does not operate in or emanate from a specific geographic region. So U.S. forces with overwhelming military superiority and advanced technology will not be the appropriate instruments to wage this war. Precision-guided smart bombs and cruise missiles are not smart enough to know who the enemy is and where it is. More important, Carl Von Clausewitz's seminal work *On War* (first published in 1832) is not a suitable manual for this war because he wrote about war between nation-states. The war on terrorism is not against another nation-state and thus not ''an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.'' Indeed, the war on terrorism is not ''merely the continuation of policy by other means.''

This is a different kind of war that requires a different paradigm. We must shed conventional Western thinking conditioned by the European wars of the 18th and 19th centuries, two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and Iraq. Rather than Clausewitz, the 2,300-year-old words of Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu from *The Art of War* are applicable. ''War'' for Sun Tzu meant ''conflict'' as it occurs throughout all aspects of life. And the ''art'' of war is conquering without aggression: ''Subduing the other's military without battle is the most skillful.'' The lesson for the war on terrorism is not that aggression is unnecessary or should be avoided. In war, aggression is inevitable. But the weapons and skills for the un-war will be different. Special Forces rather than armor or infantry divisions will be the norm. Unmanned aerial vehicles patrolling expanses of desert or inaccessible mountain regions will often replace fighter pilots and foot soldiers. Arabic and Islam will be part of the syllabus for un-warriors.

Focus on Al Qaeda

Fighting the war on terrorism requires a delicate balance. Working with countries around the world, we must dismantle the Al Qaeda terrorist network—operative by operative, cell by cell. At the same time, we must not engage in actions or follow policies that create sympathy and recruits for Al Qaeda; that is, we must avoid needlessly giving Muslims reasons

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to hate America. The core question was 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.

Although the United States must do everything it reasonably can to defend against future terrorist attacks, the war on terrorism requires aggressively seeking out and destroying the terrorists who would do us harm. Dismantling and degrading the Al Qaeda terrorist network is the one part of U.S. strategy that involves killing or capturing the enemy. But we must first understand who the enemy is and what this so-called war is really all about. Not all Muslims are Al Qaeda. Not all terrorists are Al Qaeda terrorists. 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 those distinctions in order to differentiate people 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 the Abu Sayef is a separatist group of financially motivated kidnappers, not radical Islamists who threaten the United States.

Iran is ruled by a fundamentalist Islamic regime that calls the United States the ''Great Satan,'' aspires to possess nuclear weapons, and supports anti-Israeli Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. But that does not necessarily make Iran an ally of Al Qaeda and a target in the war on terrorism.

A War Not Fought by the Military

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 against the Taliban and Al Qaeda—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 con-

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nected and decentralized network with cells and operatives in 60 countries around the world. So President Bush was right: ''We'll have to hunt them down one at a time.''

President Bush was also right to be skeptical about treating terrorism ''as a crime, a problem to be solved mainly with law enforcement and indictments.'' Nonetheless the arduous task of dismantling and degrading the network will largely be accomplished through unprecedented international intelligence and law enforcement cooperation. Military involvement in the war on terrorism will be primarily that of Special Forces in discrete operations against specific targets.

So where will the war against Al Qaeda be fought?

First and foremost, the United States must get serious about mopping up the remnants of Al Qaeda that fled Afghanistan to Pakistan—if for no other reason than because Osama bin Laden and other key senior Al Qaeda leaders are believed to be there. That means that the United States must take an active role in any operations. Successes against Al Qaeda in Pakistan—the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the September 11 attacks; Abu Zubaydah, the operational coordinator for Al Qaeda responsible for recruiting and training; and Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, wanted in connection with the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and whose laptop computer provided information about possible attacks in the United States that resulted in raising the color-coded terrorist threat level to orange in August 2004—have been the result of cooperative efforts of the Pakistanis and the United States. But when left to their own devices, the Pakistanis have largely come up empty-handed. For example, Pakistani claims of having Ayman al-Zawahiri (bin Laden's right-hand man) cornered and killing Al Qaeda's spy chief Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah (one of the FBI's most wanted terrorists for his involvement in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya) in March 2004 were both false.

Pakistan is not the only front. With the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is a logical place for Al Qaeda both to blend in and to recruit new followers. The October 2002 nightclub bombing in Bali and the August 2003 Jakarta Marriott bombing are both linked to Al Qaeda via the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah. Eleven of the 19 hijackers who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon were Saudi nationals, and the May 2003 car bombings in Riyadh have been attributed to Al Qaeda. Suicide bombings in Casablanca may be linked to Al Qaeda. Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen are weak states where Al Qaeda has previously operated and could once again hide and reconstitute.

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But Al Qaeda's presence is not limited to Muslim countries or to the Middle East and Africa. The March 2004 Madrid train bombings are attributed to Islamic militants sympathetic to Al Qaeda. Subsequently, French authorities arrested 13 people connected to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group accused of the Madrid attacks. An Al Qaeda cell in Hamburg, Germany, was allegedly involved in planning the 9/11 attacks. British authorities have arrested Al Qaeda suspects on a number of different occasions. All of those incidents point to Al Qaeda operating in Europe under cover of peaceful and law-abiding Muslim populations (the Muslim populations in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom total more than 10 million people).

Finally, we must prudently assume that Al Qaeda is operating in the United States (with an estimated Muslim population of 5–7 million people). Even America's friendly neighbor to the north, Canada, with a relatively small Muslim population (estimated at about 600,000) is a place where Al Qaeda might hide and from which it might gain access to the United States. So it is not simply a matter of ''striking the terrorists in Iraq, defeating them there so we will not have to face them in our country,'' as President Bush asserted. Every reasonable and prudent effort must be made to bolster homeland security, including making domestic counterterrorism the top priority for the FBI.

Understanding the Enemy

Just as important as knowing where to hunt down Al Qaeda is understanding it. We tend to think of Al Qaeda as an entity or structure, as a centralized organization wholly dependent on its leadership for its existence and operation. Thus the general misconception that all the nodes of the network are directly connected to the leadership and that if the leadership is destroyed, then the organization can be collapsed.

Certainly, Al Qaeda has a leadership hierarchy. At the top is Osama bin Laden. His most trusted lieutenant is Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor who is the architect of Al Qaeda's ideology and who has been indicted in the United States for his role in the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa in 1998. But Al Qaeda is not a completely centralized top-down hierarchical organization, so simply taking out the leadership will not be enough to destroy it or even degrade it so that it is less effective and able to attack the United States. Such an approach may work for regime change in rogue states ruled by dictators, but it would be a mistake to assume that it will yield the same results against Al Qaeda. In fact, we already

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know that as elements of Al Qaeda's leadership have either been captured 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.'' There is no single target (either an individual or a 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 and conceptualize Al Qaeda's structure as the honeycombs of a beehive—with the cells interconnected by multiple paths and able to be reconstructed if they are damaged or destroyed. That being the case, the task of dismantling the network will not be easy or quick—we should expect that it will take many years. Furthermore, we may not be able to completely destroy the network; the best we can hope for may be degrading Al Qaeda's capabilities so they do not represent a direct catastrophic threat to the United States. For example, if enough of the network is physically destroyed, Al Qaeda may not have the capacity to mount an attack against the U.S. homeland. In a similar vein, Al Qaeda may remain a conventional terrorist threat to America, but if the organization is deprived of weapons of mass destruction—in particular a nuclear weapon—then it does not pose a catastrophic threat.

We must also understand that Al Qaeda is more than just a terrorist organization; it is also an idea. Al Qaeda is representative of a radical brand of Islam, but what is underappreciated by most Americans— although largely understood by most foreign analysts—is that Al Qaeda's real war 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 of winning and losing. But the United States could lose the war if by its policies and actions it creates the perception that the war on terrorism is being waged against all Muslims and polarizes the more than one billion Muslims in the world to view America as the enemy.

And it is important to understand that Al Qaeda's ideology has taken on a life of its own. What is unknown is the extent to which Al Qaeda's radicalism has taken hold throughout the Muslim world, but certainly the U.S. preoccupation with Iraq for more than three years after the September 11 attacks has given time and space for the cancer to spread, as well as

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a rallying cry for recruiting 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 or contact with Al Qaeda (e.g., planning, training, financing). 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 Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group has been the primary target of the Spanish investigation) are signs of that phenomenon.

Allies and Friendly Countries

Because the war on terrorism requires unprecedented cooperation between U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies and those in other countries, the United States needs to improve relations with foreign intelligence agencies in order to be able to share information about suspected Al Qaeda operatives. (Such cooperation should be limited to intelligence and law enforcement; the U.S. military should not become involved in fighting other nations' wars for them.) Foreign law enforcement and internal security agencies will have primary responsibility for apprehending suspected Al Qaeda terrorists in their countries. And the hurdles of extradition will have to be overcome so that foreign governments hand over the terrorists who are caught. Again, the United States will need to use its political and diplomatic skill to elicit such cooperation. The threat of military force (let alone its actual use) is not a viable option.

In the final analysis, the United States will not be able to go it alone in the war on terrorism. The United States will need to convince other countries to take actions that are in U.S. interests. Diplomacy and statecraft may ultimately be the most important tools for achieving success against Al Qaeda.

Suggested Readings

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