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Policymakers

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46. Countering Terrorism

Policymakers should

- stop using the misleading phrase ''war on terrorism'';
- understand that an aim of terrorism is to elicit overreactions that damage the victim state as badly or worse than direct attacks;
- focus on disrupting al Qaeda senior leadership's ability to plan future terrorist attacks and attract and train new recruits;
- work with foreign governments to apprehend al Qaeda operatives in other countries, but be prepared to take unilateral action when foreign governments are unable or unwilling to take action themselves and when the diplomatic and strategic risks are low; and
- recognize that effective strategies for confronting the threat of terrorism rarely involve large-scale military action and that the presence of U.S. ground troops on foreign soil might actually be counterproductive.

Terrorism is best understood as politically motivated violence directed against nonmilitary targets. It is a tactic favored by weak, nonstate actors to raise the costs of a targeted state's policies. Terrorist attacks impose direct costs in lost lives and property, of course, but they produce greater costs to the victim—and corresponding benefits to the terrorists—when they goad the targeted nation into self-injurious overreaction. These overreactions fall into the following categories:

- **Waste of blood and treasure.** Terrorist attacks, or well-placed threats of attack, can prompt the victim to waste its own resources—both the blood of its soldiers and the wealth of its people.
- **Recruitment and sympathy gains.** A strong power victimized by terrorism may respond with violence that is badly directed, or even

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entirely misdirected, engendering sympathy for terrorist groups and therefore aiding their recruiting and support.

- **Weakened political order and society.** Terrorism may cause victim states to come loose from their ideological moorings, such as the West's traditions of tolerance, individual rights, due process, and the rule of law.

Carefully measured responses deny terrorists the strategic upper hand they seek but cannot achieve on their own. They will deny terrorists the false perception among their target audiences that they are powerful, and they will deny terrorists the moral authority they seek by coaxing wrongdoing from the states they attack.

President George W. Bush did not adopt a careful, strategic approach to terrorism following the 9/11 attacks. Understandably at first, though less so as time passed, he and his administration overreacted to terrorism and clung stubbornly to the ''war on terror'' metaphor, even as his administration pursued al Qaeda by both military and nonmilitary means.

The members of the new administration will have considerable latitude in shaping policy, but they should begin by formally discarding the phrase ''war on terror,'' which conceals and confuses the nature of U.S. efforts to hunt down violent extremists. The term falsely implies that the challenge is chiefly a military one, and therefore stimulates demand for largely irrelevant, and occasionally counterproductive, military spending. The disastrous invasion of Iraq reflects the problems inherent in construing counterterrorism as a military problem, to be solved by military means. Finally, the loose reference to ''terror'' is overbroad and inaccurately lumps together disparate groups with often-incompatible objectives. By casting the challenge posed by al Qaeda terrorists as a war, policymakers risk contributing to the already widespread perception that the United States is engaged in a war against all of Islam, thereby playing into the rhetoric of the violent extremists.

In addition to dispensing with the ''war on terror,'' the incoming president and his team can and should focus the government's efforts on those counterterrorism policies that will most likely reduce the threat of mass-casualty attacks. Effective tactics include infiltrating and disrupting terror groups. Targeted, lawful surveillance of terrorists and terror suspects is essential. Controlling access to weapons of mass destruction and their precursors is also vital. Taking reasonable precautions to secure against likely vectors of attack on infrastructure is also important, as is preparing for attacks and their aftermaths. Public communications that more accurately

convey risks might quell public demand for overreaction. (For more, see Chapter 47, ''Domestic Security.'')

Above all, policymakers should aim to counter the strategic logic of terrorism. Specifically, they should take great care not to expend the nation's blood and treasure, avoiding military action if at all possible. They should not give terrorists the gift of overreactions such as violence that injures innocents, as this will aid the terrorists by driving new recruits into their ranks. Finally, they should stand by the foundational Western values of individual rights, due process, tolerance, and the rule of law. In fashioning a proactive strategy to prevent future acts of terrorism, and to mitigate terrorism's harmful effects should prevention fail, policymakers must account for the possibility that short-term reactions might have counterproductive medium- to long-term effects.

The Response to 9/11

Nearly every U.S. president has dealt in some fashion with the threat posed by individuals or groups who wage violence against civilians to advance a political agenda. Rarely, if ever, have past presidents declared war against the group responsible for a specific terrorist act or acts, and none has ever declared war on the tactic ''terrorism.''

Given the sheer scale of the killing and destruction in the 9/11 attacks and the enormous psychological effect on all Americans, to say nothing of the damage to the U.S. economy, it is understandable that the initial reaction was a desire for revenge. The 19 hijackers were already dead, but Americans wanted to know who financed the operation, who trained the hijackers, and who inspired them to commit mass murder.

We didn't have to look very long, or very hard. Terrorism experts within the White House and elsewhere had correctly fixed on al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden within a matter of a few hours. The administration had already begun executing plans for hunting down bin Laden and his followers by the time President Bush appeared before a joint session of Congress nine days later and declared: ''Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.'' The Bush administration adopted a multifaceted approach to fighting terrorism, combining intelligence analysis; traditional law enforcement; and, at times, the use of the U.S. military, including the high-profile missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. But while the actual conduct of the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies implies something different from a traditional

war, the Bush White House was extremely reluctant to give up the ''war on terror'' metaphor. Bush chose to highlight the use of the military as his primary means for combating the most important challenge of his presidency, in part to draw distinctions between himself and his political opponents. Thus was the terminology surrounding the fight against al Qaeda filtered through the lens of partisan politics.

That did not serve us well. As a report by the Defense Science Board notes, evocative phrases such as ''global war on terror'' and ''fighting them there so we don't fight them here'' ''may have short-term benefits in motivating support at home.'' But this ''polarizing rhetoric,'' the report went on to say, ''can have adverse long-term consequences that reduce the willingness of potential allies to collaborate, and give unwarranted legitimacy and unity of effort to dispersed adversaries.''

Indeed, a number of experts have lamented the ''war on terror'' construct. By declaring a global war on terror, Jeffrey Record wrote in a paper for the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College:

> The [Bush] administration . . . subordinated strategic clarity to the moral clarity it strives for in foreign policy and may have set the United States on a course of open-ended and gratuitous conflict with states and nonstate entities that pose no serious threat to the United States.

''Most of the [global war on terror's] declared objectives,'' Record concluded, ''are unrealistic and condemn the United States to a hopeless quest for absolute security. As such, the [global war on terror's] goals are also politically, fiscally, and militarily unsustainable.''

The eminent military historian Michael Howard likewise objected to the term ''war.'' ''It implies something finite; a conflict with a clear beginning and an even clearer conclusion,'' Howard wrote in the journal *Survival*. ''Further, 'war' normally is essentially the concern of the military. Today, that is not self-evident,'' he concluded.

There is also the utter irrationality of declaring war on a tactic. It makes no more sense than it would have for the British and French to have declared war on blitzkrieg in 1939, or for the Americans to have declared war on kamikaze attacks in the Pacific in 1944. Given this flawed formulation, it can be said that the American ''war effort'' was off the rails from the beginning.

Rhetoric, and the shaping of expectations, are more important in the context of counterterrorism operations than in traditional wars. Victory or defeat in most wars is determined by armies on the battlefield or fleets

at sea. By contrast, because terrorists aim specifically at invoking anxiety among the public at large, measures intended to shore up public will are crucial to an effective strategy for countering terrorism.

Our strategy must also be based on reasonable expectations. Terrorism has persisted throughout human history, and it will be with us in some form forever. President Bush candidly conceded this point during the 2004 campaign, when he said to *Today* show host Matt Lauer, ''I don't think you can win it.'' Containing the problem requires a tight focus on the most urgent threats. Of particular concern is the remote, but serious, risk that terrorists might gain control of a nuclear weapon. The scope of destruction from even a single act of nuclear terrorism would be greater than anything ever before witnessed on U.S. soil. It is logical, therefore, for policymakers to pay even more attention, and likely devote more resources, to programs aimed at locking down loose nuclear materials. Diplomacy and cooperation with other countries might include measures to discourage further nuclear proliferation and to enhance security of existing arsenals, but rarely military action.

Many other proposals ostensibly geared toward countering the threat of terrorism, however, will likely be irrelevant and might actually prove harmful. For example, there is strong bipartisan support for expanding the military, especially the army and marines, despite the fact that conventional military forces play only a limited role in combating terrorism. With the exception of the U.S. military operations to depose the Taliban and disrupt al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, the most successful counterterrorism operations have not involved large numbers of ground troops. The disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq—cited in a National Intelligence Estimate as the ''cause célèbre'' for jihadists, ''breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihad movement''—stand in stark contrast to the successful nonmilitary operations that enabled the United States to capture such al Qaeda figures as Ramzi Binalshibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the key plotters of the 9/11 attacks.

To the extent that our military, and especially our ground forces, have been stretched by the war in Iraq, ending the war in a timely fashion would immediately relieve these stresses. So long as policymakers refuse to end our military involvement and bring U.S. troops home, however, the persistent U.S. presence will likely undermine our wider counterterrorism efforts. A number of experts note that stationing conventional forces in foreign lands is not conducive to fighting terrorism. Indeed, it is often

counterproductive. The University of Chicago's Robert Pape links the presence of American troops in the Middle East to the threat of future suicide terrorism against the United States and credits the occupation of Iraq with strengthening al Qaeda. Michael Scheuer, a 22-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency who served as head of the agency's bin Laden unit from 1996 to 1999, concurs. Because of the Iraq War, Scheuer told an interviewer in 2006, ''there are more people willing to take up arms against the United States, and we have less ability to win hearts and minds in the Arab world.''

What Works?

An effective strategy for countering terrorism, and doing so in a manner that does not generate still more terrorism, begins by putting the problem into the proper perspective. The violence and bloodshed that can be unleashed by modern industrial states are several orders of magnitude greater than any caused by international terrorism in the 21st century. This is true even, for example, in the unlikely event that terrorists manage to get their hands on a functioning nuclear device, or build one on their own, and then detonate it in a populated area.

But to portray the terrorists as an existential threat to the United States, or more broadly the West, dramatically exaggerates their power and influence. It is a mistake to repeat al Qaeda's intentions as if they are plausible. Precious few people around the world wish to live under the rule of radical Islamists. Although many Muslims believe that Islam should have a prominent role in political life, solid majorities in many predominantly Muslim countries—including Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan—worry about Islamic extremism. A National Intelligence Estimate prepared in 2006, titled ''The Trends in Global Terrorism,'' explained, ''The jihadists' greatest vulnerability is that their ultimate political solution—an ultraconservative interpretation of shari'a-based governance spanning the Muslim world—is unpopular with the vast majority of Muslims.''

Indeed, recent research has concluded that the threat of terrorism is already on the wane. Andrew Mack and Zoe Nielsen analyzed four different data sets and determined that, broadly speaking, the incidences of global terrorism and the human costs of terrorist violence had declined since 2001. Looking to the future, Mack and Nielsen surmised, ''In the long term, perhaps sooner, Islamist terror organizations will join the overwhelming

majority of other terrorist groups that have failed to achieve their objectives.''

Other empirical studies comport with these findings. Researcher Max Abrahms looked at 28 terrorist organizations and found that they failed to achieve their stated policy objectives 93 percent of the time. Abrahms further concluded that terrorism's ''poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself.'' Because acts of terrorism often kill or injure the very people that terrorists seek to influence, the strategy carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. The *Atlantic Monthly*'s James Fallows concluded that al Qaeda's ''hopes for fundamentally harming the United States . . . rest less on what it can do itself than on what it can trick, tempt, or goad us into doing.'' In short, terrorist aims may be grandiose, but their capacity for achieving those aims is severely limited. The most effective counterterrorism strategies capitalize on our strengths and exploit their weaknesses to let them lose.

A Fresh Start

The intellectual ferment within Islam presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the West. On the one hand, non-Muslims have only a very limited capacity to shape the debate in a positive direction. As the 9/11 Commission report concluded: ''We must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity, even though our own promotion of these messages is limited in its effectiveness simply because we are its carriers. . . . The United States can promote moderation, but cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do this.''

On the other hand, and paradoxically, while we cannot ''ensure the ascendancy'' of moderate Muslims, we have a great capacity for influencing the debate within Islam in a negative direction—empowering extremists and marginalizing moderates. As radical Islamism struggles to expand its reach, our words sometimes matter as much as our actions. Thus have our enemies seized on the phrase ''war on terror'' to claim, falsely, that the United States is at war with Islam.

Policymakers should take steps to differentiate their policies from those of the Bush White House and should focus particular attention on those policies that have created ill will within the Muslim community. The leading source of resentment is the U.S. war in Iraq, and policymakers should commit to swiftly ending the U.S. military presence there. Other necessary steps include closing the terrorist holding facilities at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and formally renouncing torture, including waterboard-

ing. A series of high-profile public diplomacy and outreach initiatives is also warranted, and might include a particular focus on those predominantly Muslim countries that have managed to maintain working relationships with the United States despite some of the unfortunate excesses of the Bush administration.

Above all else, however, policymakers should approach the problem of terrorism with the necessary perspective. Claims that our national survival hangs in the balance, or that the terrorists pose an existential threat comparable to that of the Nazis or the Soviets, build pressure for policies that do not increase our security but do erode the very liberties that define us as a nation. The new president should begin by recasting the discussion away from that of a war to be won and toward thinking of terrorism as a problem to be confronted and managed.

Suggested Readings

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Pape, Robert. ''Suicide Terrorism and Democracy: What We've Learned Since 9/11.'' Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 582, November 1, 2006.

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