

Chapter 6

Post-Cold War Strategies

Terrorism/Counterterrorism Strategies

Threats to American national security interests are far broader than those posed by al-Qaeda and associated movements, but those threats have played a prominent role in national security policy post 9/11. This section summarizes both the AQAM strategy and the US counter strategy.

Al-Qaeda's Strategy to the Year 2020

Al-Qaeda's strategy contains elements of both classic insurgency strategy and cost-imposing strategies. Insurgents commit terrorist acts in hopes of provoking an exaggerated response that will drive the target civilian audience to the insurgents' side in a competition for the hearts and minds of the public. Cost-imposing strategies hope to provoke exhaustive responses over time.

Insurgencies are a competition for the right to govern. Whether the established government is corrupt, tyrannical, or foreign, insurgents consider it illegitimate. Insurgents often have separate political and military wings. The political wing may participate in the legitimate political process, may develop a shadow government in waiting, and may provide social services to attract the contested population. The military wing commits terrorist acts to demonstrate that the established government cannot provide security and hopes to provoke an exaggerated response from the established government that will drive the target civilian audience to their side. But if not properly calibrated, the focus and scale of attacks may have the opposite effect. As the insurgency advances, the military wing may field militias to directly oppose government forces. The eventual victory will be ushered in by a *General Uprising* of the masses in Maoist doctrine, or a *Grand March* of the *umma* in ibn Taymiyya's teachings.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's intellectual lead, formulated its grand strategy. Abdel Bari Atwan claims that al-Zawahiri relied heavily on Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. According to Kennedy, past empires fell because of the increasing costs of internal security, the increasing costs of military operations, and the growing strength of economic competitors. Al-Qaeda's strategy followed.¹

In 1996, Usamah bin Muhammed bin Awad bin Ladin declared war on Americans occupying the Arabian Peninsula, the land of two holy mosques.² Bin Laden made explicit his *casus belli*. Former CIA station chief for al-Qaeda, Michael Scheuer, lists six US policies considered by bin Laden to be anti-Islamic.³

- US support for Israel that keeps Palestinians in the Israelis' thrall.
- US and other Western troops on the Arabian Peninsula.
- US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- US support for Russia, India, and China against their Muslim militants.
- US pressure on Arab energy producers to keep oil prices low.
- US support for apostate, corrupt, and tyrannical Muslim governments.

The objective of al-Qaeda's strategy is the establishment of a regional and then worldwide caliphate. The center of gravity, the point at which all effort is directed, is the US economy. Suicide bombers, irregular military forces, and the Internet are the primary means of the strategy. "Al-Qaeda wishes to foment a 'clash of civilizations,' with Christian fundamentalism opposed to Islamic fundamentalism" building on the crusading spirits of both.

By committing terrorist attacks against the United States (e.g., 9/11, embassy bombings, *USS Cole*), al-Qaeda hoped to draw the United States into invading a Muslim country (e.g., Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq) where AQAM had the advantage in a war of attrition. The presence of Western forces will have the desired

¹ Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of Al-Qaeda* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006), 221.

² *Al-Islah*, London, 2 September 1996, 1-12.

³ Anonymous (Michael Scheuer), *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2004), 241.

effect of enraging the *umma*. Local resistance will form, outside jihadists will be attracted, and neighboring Muslim states will be drawn in.

By committing terrorist acts against other Western powers (e.g., Madrid, London), al-Qaeda will drive a wedge between the US and its allies. An increasingly isolated United States will bear the costs of war alone.

Violence is accompanied by two-pronged explanatory rhetoric aimed at people rather than governments. All al-Qaeda and Western actions are explained through the lens of the widely held Arab narrative. The narrative includes the Crusades and the heroic, unifying figure of Saladin, the *Great Betrayal* following World War I, the establishment of Israel after World War II, and the long humiliation of colonialism. Rhetoric is also aimed at Western publics explaining that their own governments' actions brought violence to their homeland.

Actions are to be taken in parallel with terrorist acts to transform al-Qaeda from an organization into a movement. Information technology, including the Internet, will be exploited to promulgate an ideology, guiding principles, and a common set of operating procedures. With ideology and procedures widely distributed, global operations can continue without centralized command from al-Qaeda.

Economic collapse is the inevitable outcome of an increasingly isolated United States engaged in too many wars of attrition. Collapse of the worldwide economic system and global political instability will quickly follow and create the conditions for the *Grand March* leading to establishment of the caliphate.

The events of 9/11 led the United States to invade Afghanistan and deny the movement's primary sanctuary. Al-Qaeda's operations were severely disrupted. But the US invasion of Iraq played into the movement's hands. Arabs had been disadvantaged in Pashtu-speaking Afghanistan by language and by geography. Arabic speakers in states neighboring Iraq had family, clan, and tribal relations that allowed easy movement throughout the region. Jihadists flowed easily and rapidly into Iraq to oppose the presence of foreign powers. Iraq has far more significance to Arabs than does Afghanistan. Iraq, the Land of Two Rivers, has more holy places than Saudi Arabia, the Land of Two Holy Mosques. And Baghdad has extraordinary historical significance to Arabs and Muslims as home of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Islamic Golden Age (750-1258).

Al-Qaeda's strategy to induce overextension of the United States is bore fruit after 9/11. China and India provide the economic competition. Terrorist acts committed against the US homeland increase the costs of internal security. Commitment of US military forces to Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere entail extraordinary costs for military operations abroad. Both the primacy and cooperative security strategies contain the seeds of overextension by extending the US security umbrella.

US Counter Strategy

The ends of strategy include reducing the likelihood of attack, the severity of attack, and the number of people ready to take up arms against the United States. There are a variety of ways in a strategy to counter al-Qaeda, including invasion and major combat operations, regime change, proactive and reactive law enforcement, intelligence operations, nation building, and strikes and raids. The various strategies—distinguished by their emphasis on ways—are compared according to their blowback, sustainability, the need for international cooperation, and the need for interagency cooperation requiring the reorganization of government. The ways chosen create varying degrees of opposition and additional means are required to overcome additional opposition.

Unlike the Cold War, there is no agreement on the nature of the current conflict environment or on the strategic response.⁴ Counterterrorist and counterterrorism conceptions are possible. A *counterterrorist* conception is more of a manhunt than a war. It focuses on the individuals who plan and execute terrorist acts. Overt military strikes and raids, in and out, are used when appropriate. A *counterterrorism* conception, as implemented under the label of the global war on terrorism, involves protracted war beginning with regime change and followed by nation building under hostile conditions.

Both conceptions beg for international support, but mobilizing public support for information sharing and cooperative law enforcement under a counterterrorist conception is less demanding and easier to sustain

⁴ D. Robert Worley, "From Concept to Policy: Evolution in Thinking on the War against Terrorism 2002-2004," *Small Wars Journal* 6, no. 12 (December 2010). Accessed 16 January 2011 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/journal/iss/v6n12.pdf>.

over time than is support for continuous war, regime change, and nation building under a counterterrorism conception. Nation building, in turn, makes greater demands for orchestrating all instruments of US power.

Counterterrorism Conception

As put into practice in the global war on terrorism, nation building is the most prominent way of strategy. *Nation building*, for lack of a better name, has at least three components. The first is building a unifying sense of national identity from disparate, even warring, factions. The second is building the institutions of state. And the third is economic development to put the economy on a sustainable path. Postwar Germany and Japan already had a strong sense of national identity; long experience in civil governance, including skilled bureaucrats; and had demonstrated mastery of industrial-age economies, including an educated and skilled workforce. Countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia present quite different starting points.

Nation building can be conducted after forced regime change in the context of *post-conflict reconstruction*, or it can be conducted at the invitation of a host nation in trouble. Nation building is the mission that exposes the inadequacy of US government organization and demands reform. There is no political consensus on nation building or a strategy based on it. Yet post-Cold War presidents Clinton and Bush found it irresistible. And there are proposals for significant government reorganization to support the nation building mission.

A question is asked in every intervention into hostilities, how many American lives is it worth to separate warring factions. For many Americans, the answer is “none.” But this is precisely the character of present day conflicts, regardless of whether they are called small wars, complex contingencies, low intensity conflict, peace operations, nation building, or capacity building. It is precisely this type of conflict that most requires orchestration of all instruments of national power, and it is this type of conflict that most demands reform of American government. And yet there is little or no public debate to build the consensus to commitment for a national security strategy based on this complex mission space.

If history is a guide, then the next couple decades will resemble those following US withdrawal from Vietnam. Calls for governmental reorganization were common in the 1970s to better carry out the interagency operations attempted in Vietnam. But the public and its policy makers had tired of a long war where victory was a fuzzy concept at best. Nation building fell from favor, and the will for reform faded. Hard-won knowledge and institutional memory decayed.

Counterterrorist Conception

Rather than conceiving of the problem as a dysfunctional state and the solution as nation building, a counterterrorist conception focuses on the individuals who plan and carryout terrorist acts. Overt military strikes and raids, direct actions by special operations forces, and proactive and reactive law enforcement actions are the principal ways of a counterterrorist strategy.

Strikes and raids with limited objectives, constrained in place and time, should not be confused with waging protracted war. Examples of strike operations include Reagan’s air raid on Libya; Clinton’s raids on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Sudan; Obama’s strikes on Kaddafi in support of Libyan rebels; and Israel’s air raids on Iraq and Syria. Strikes and raids can be employed to destroy capability, as the Osiraq raid, or they can be conducted as punitive retaliation in hopes of deterring future terrorist attacks.

Manhunt can comprise a distinct way in strategy or it can be considered a subset of strikes and raids. A manhunt requires tight cooperation between the intelligence services and special operations forces culminating in *direct actions*. The special operations doctrinal construct is find, fix, finish, and follow up (F4). The word *neutralize* was defined in the Vietnam era’s Phoenix Program doctrine to mean kill, capture, turn, or turn in place. Neutralize can substitute for finish in the F4 construct, and follow up involves exploiting intelligence collected during the finish phase. And the cycle repeats. A kingpin strategy was once dominant in the war on drugs and involved capturing those higher in the drug cartel hierarchy rather than foot soldiers and middle management.

Several attempted terrorist attacks have been thwarted, not by military force, but by *proactive law enforcement* and intelligence operations. Some arrests have been public, but the real work has been done quietly, for good reason, in the background. Intelligence and law enforcement efforts are less glamorous, less costly, and many

would argue far more likely to reduce the threat than overt use of the military instrument.⁵ International, national, state, and local law enforcement agencies have significant intelligence capabilities. Criminal organizations conspiring to conduct a terrorist attack are targeted for intelligence collection, infiltration, and disruption. Reactive law enforcement, investigating and prosecuting terrorists after the fact, at a minimum, contribute intelligence in the follow-up phase.

Critiques

States or terrorists? According to Richard Clarke, former national security advisor on terrorism, the principal failure of US decision makers was to direct its efforts not at al-Qaeda but at its state sponsor, protector, or enabler. Specifically, a primary way in extant US strategy is state centric, leading to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq followed by nation building amidst insurgency. Since the Obama administration, the United States appears to have affected a shift in the ways of its strategy. Less emphasis is given to wars and nation building, and more emphasis is given to a manhunt for al-Qaeda leadership.

One objective of the al-Qaeda strategy is to create a movement without central command. The existence of independent terrorist attempts gives some sense that progress has been made toward this objective. If the objective has been met, then the loss of Osama bin Laden will not be critical. But if the role of a heroic, charismatic leader to unify the *umma* is critical to the Arab narrative, then a manhunt for al-Qaeda leadership may be the most effective.

Religion or policy? According to Mike Scheurer, chief of the CIA's former bin Laden task force, the principal failure of US decisionmakers is viewing the source of the conflict in terms of fundamentalist religious beliefs rather than as a reaction to US policies toward the region. "They hate us for what we do, not for who we are." The nature of twentieth century terrorism—largely the product of leftist, secular organizations including the Palestinian Liberation Front and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—supports Scheurer's conclusion. And content analysis of bin Laden's public statements also supports the conclusion that al-Qaeda and associated movements are responding to US policies often cast in the language of religion.⁶

Strategic Calculation

Nationalism—a sense of national identity combined with the desire for self determination—is an intangible and immeasurable force, but it is a powerful force not to be taken lightly. Violating national sovereignty—either by war and protracted occupation or by periodic strikes and raids—will create opposition in different degree. The additional opposition imposes additional costs (means) and those costs must be considered in selecting the ways of strategy.

Even given the great precision available today, and improvements in precision to come, collateral damage will continue. Technological, intelligence, and procedural failures are inevitable. The effect of collateral damage inflicted in a punitive or preemptive strike is one thing. Affronts to nationalism through occupation and the accumulation of collateral damage in a protracted conflict have greater potential to push a population toward the enemy and lead to defeat.

Periodic, discrete strike operations, whether conducted by air or land forces, are more sustainable than invasion, occupation, and nation building. Certainly they are more sustainable economically. They also conserve military forces for application when only military power will do. It is easier to maintain public consensus to commitment for periodic strikes than for continual war. The continuous application of all instruments of power, supported by periodic strikes and raids, is sustainable indefinitely.

⁵ Germain Difo, "Ordinary Measures, Extraordinary Results: An Assessment of Foiled Plots since 9/11," (Washington, D.C.: American Security Project, May 2010), www.AmericanSecurityProject.org, accessed 19 September 2010.

⁶ Alejandro J. Beutel and Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, "Examining Bin Laden's Statements: A Quantitative Content Analysis from 1996 to 2011," (Bethesda, Md.: Minaret of Freedom Institute, 30 September 2011), www.minaret.org/ubl.pdf, accessed 28 October 2011.