



# DEFEATING TERRORISM



## STRATEGIC ISSUE ANALYSIS

### War Aims and War Termination

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#### Conclusions:

- This war can be won, not merely contained, but only if we choose our aims and strategies correctly.
- Our enemy is not terrorism, it is al Qaeda's radical ideology.
- Our war aim must be the defeat of this ideology. If we achieve this, mass casualty terrorism against Americans will subside; if we do not, counterterrorist efforts will inevitably fail.
- To defeat this ideology requires both a war of military violence to destroy al Qaeda's current operatives and a war of ideas to prevent their replacement from among the millions of politically uncommitted Muslims.
- We cannot allow our military means to undermine our ideological ends: the hearts and minds of politically uncommitted Muslims are the center of gravity; military exigencies, while important, take second place.
- This war of ideas must focus on a "third way": neither al Qaeda's radical separatism nor an imposed Westernism, but an indigenous alternative that allows the legitimate religious yearnings of everyday Muslims to see political expression.

What is our desired end state in this war? Is it achievable? If it is, how will we know when we've achieved it? Is this to be an open-ended campaign like the war on drugs, with no real end point likely, or is there hope for a meaningful victory that could someday terminate the conflict? Is there a center of gravity against which decisive effort can be directed and the war won thereby, or is the enemy so amorphous and ubiquitous that we face instead a future of chronic low-level hostilities susceptible only to management or containment and with no real hope of resolution?

In fact, this war can be won, not merely contained. But this will require war aims focused on our enemies' ideology, not their tactics. And this in turn will demand an especially close interconnection between a war of military violence and an inseparable war of ideas. In fact, the best lens for understanding this new war and its termination requirements may be our last great military-ideological struggle: the Cold War. Just as that conflict used military means to preserve an opportunity to triumph on the battlefield of ideas, so in this conflict we must look to a synergistic interaction between violence to root out terrorists and persuasion to prevent their replacement from among the great mass of politically uncommitted Muslims.

The case for this interconnected framing of war aims, termination conditions, and strategies rests on the answers to four questions: what's at stake; what's the real threat to those stakes; what would suffice to

end the threat; and how would we know when we've achieved this?

#### What is at Stake?

In objective terms, terrorism was traditionally thought to threaten only small stakes; for many, the real challenge was thus to avoid over-reacting to vivid but minor acts of violence. This war is different. In just 2 hours, the September 11 attacks killed fully a tenth as many Americans as died in the entire Vietnam War. This would be horrible enough as an isolated incident, but we can expect many more such attempts. Unchecked, our enemies could inflict mass casualties on a scale unseen by Americans since the World Wars—yet this time, our dead would be mostly civilians in their very homes and workplaces.

Nor is this all. As we have already seen, global economic health is at risk. The September 11 attacks have already plunged America into near-certain recession. With the world economy's current weakness, more such strikes could induce far deeper crises both here and abroad. Some describe this as a war for cheap oil, but far more is at stake economically than just the price of gasoline at American service stations. A major, sustained, worldwide economic contraction is entirely possible if we fail to thwart a long-term continuation of mass-casualty attacks. These stakes are thus far closer to those of a major war than to traditional terrorism,

and warrant responses appropriate to war in their scope and energy.

### **What is the Threat?**

What—and more important, *who*—threatens these stakes? Who are our enemies, what do they want, and how much of what they want must be thwarted to secure our vital interests? These questions have yet to be answered clearly. Attempts to date have included evil itself, terrorism, “terrorism of global reach,” al Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden. None is satisfactory, and the resulting ambiguity has important strategic consequences.

Calls for a war against “evil,” for example, are rhetorical license without meaningful strategic content. “Terrorism,” by contrast, is a tactic, not an opponent. Declaring a “War on Terrorism” is like declaring a “War on Strategic Bombing” or a “War on Alliances.” As such, it is at once too broad, too narrow, and beside the point. We surely do not seek war with the IRA or the Tamil Tigers, though both are terrorists. Adding “of global reach” doesn’t help: globalization has so eroded the effects of distance that any established terrorist group can reach targets over intercontinental distances—if the IRA isn’t a threat to America, it’s not because they can’t get here or couldn’t build a network here if they so chose. “Reach” isn’t the problem. *Intent* is: our enemies are those whose intentions embody mass killing of Americans.

Bin Laden and al Qaeda are thus closer, as both clearly harbor such intent. Neither, however, is sufficient. Al Qaeda could now survive without bin Laden; killing him alone would not destroy his organization. More important, al Qaeda itself could be destroyed without eliminating the threat if the ideology it represents survives it. It is al Qaeda’s *ideology*—and the malign intent this creates and embodies—that pose the real threat. No campaign which leaves this ideology vital and intact can succeed in eliminating the real threat to our vital interests that September 11 unveiled.

What is this ideology, and what makes it so threatening? Two points are most important. First, it is radically separatist. Al Qaeda seeks to preserve a puritanical, strictly fundamentalist Islam by isolating it from the destructive influences of modern, and especially Western, culture. Western ideas are seen as a profound threat to the proper practice of the faith; they see in them a licentious decadence that both affronts God and corrupts humanity. Only by eliminating the temptation of Western ideas and culture can the community of the faithful properly serve Allah.

In the near term, this mandates expulsion of all Western presence from Arabia; eventually, it implies the need to cleanse all Islam of Western influence. This, in turn, poses major economic risks for a world economy dependent on Arabian and Indonesian oil, and presents insurmountable difficulties for long-standing U.S. commitments to Israel.

Yet even if we left Arabia and abandoned Israel, this would still fall short of satisfying the demands implied by the logic of al Qaeda’s doctrine. In a world of global communication, international broadcasting, and growing cultural interpenetration, it is impossible to imagine a society successfully insulating itself from outside influences for very long. A strictly observant Islamic world of al Qaeda’s design would inevitably find itself in conflict with Western ideas it could not possibly wall off beyond its shores. If the proper practice of Islam and the influence of Western culture are incompatible, and if the former is a central obligation of the faithful, then conflict between the West and al Qaeda’s radically separatist version of Islam is literally existential, and al Qaeda is unlikely ever to accept long-term coexistence even if its other aims were somehow realized. If so, then we cannot satisfy them with any feasible proffer; ultimately, Western concessions are likelier to stimulate further demands than to satisfy such an opponent. Only a global imposition of their interpretation of the faith could be stable and sufficient for them in the long term. Al Qaeda’s separatist ideology thus puts it on an inevitable collision course with our basic way of life.

The second crucial feature of al Qaeda’s ideology is its commitment to violence in pursuit of political empowerment. Separatist religious communities are not problematic in themselves; on the contrary, they have a long tradition in American history. The combination of radical separatism and mass violence, however, is poisonous. Al Qaeda sees violence as both acceptable and necessary, and draws no distinction between military and civilian targets for this violence. Nor does al Qaeda’s doctrine condone passive acceptance of their ideas without active participation in the fighting: bin Laden’s declaration of jihad against the West obligates all followers to armed struggle. In bin Laden’s view, Muslims cannot properly stand on the sideline in this war. Even if only a fraction of bin Laden’s potential followers act on his injunction, the spread of these ideas thus has profound military consequences; we need to be concerned not just with the extent of al Qaeda’s formal membership, but also with the extent of its ideological penetration in the Muslim world.

This combination of radical separatism and jihad is thus dangerous; it is also unusual, and distinguishes al

Qaeda from other terrorist groups that have not to date inflicted mass casualties on Americans. Organizations like Hamas or Hezbollah, for example, while violent, have far more limited political aims centered on installing fundamentalist Islamic governments in specific states. Among Middle Eastern terrorist groups, only al Qaeda has yet formulated an ideological program oriented around a radical separatism focusing less on Israel or on the overthrow of individual Arab regimes per se than on the exclusion of Western influence from the entire region. While more traditional terrorist groups could well merge their aims into al Qaeda's in the future—and especially if the latter sees initial success—they need not, and have not to date. It is strongly in our interest to dissuade them from doing so. While terrorists of many stripes may threaten Americans, the vital national interests sketched above are threatened only by a much narrower subset represented by al Qaeda alone. Most terrorism does not approach the dangers raised by September 11; the real threat to America is thus much narrower than terrorism as such.

But while al Qaeda is a small minority even among terrorist groups, much less among Islam as a whole, it aspires to majority status in the Muslim world. The export of this ideology beyond the ranks of al Qaeda's current operatives is thus a profound threat to our vital national interests. This export could take the form of increased membership for al Qaeda or the adoption of al Qaeda's ideological program by terrorists who now share only some of its aims; either outcome is equally dangerous to us. It will do little good to kill current operatives if, in the meantime, they recruit more new adherents than we have removed. Restricting the ideology's spread is at least as important as rooting out its current members if we are ever to get on top of the problem.

Our real opponent is thus the ideology that underpins al Qaeda's terrorist program—it is not terrorism per se, nor even al Qaeda itself. And this implies that our war aims must include not only eliminating al Qaeda's current operatives, but preventing their ideology from spreading beyond their current membership. To do this will demand the use of force and coercive leverage to root out bin Laden's terrorists and their state sponsors—but it will also require us to win a war of ideas to persuade the great mass of politically uncommitted Muslims that al Qaeda's separatist ideology is a dead end. This war of ideas will matter as centrally as the war of bullets for ultimate victory or defeat: if we lose the former, we will surely lose the latter, as the flow of new recruits will inevitably swamp our ability to find and eliminate veteran fighters.

## **What Would Suffice to End the Threat?**

This conception of war aims implies a center of gravity against which a successful campaign could be directed. If we can deny al Qaeda a flow of new recruits, we can eventually destroy it. Al Qaeda's shadowy, covert nature will make the process of running down its members slow and laborious, but sustained effort can eventually grind down any organization of fixed size. The challenge is to keep al Qaeda's size fixed in the meantime. If they succeed in exporting their ideas to any significant portion of broader Islam, then we will never be able to cope militarily with the resulting flood of people and resources into Bin Laden's camp. But if al Qaeda fails to spread its ideas, then even a slow-moving military campaign will eventually snuff it out. The center of gravity in this war thus lies in the hearts and minds of politically uncommitted Muslims: if bin Laden succeeds in converting them to his ideology of separatist jihad, then no plausible U.S. military effort will be sufficient to prevail; but if we succeed in winning the war of ideas, then al Qaeda will eventually be destroyed by our accompanying military operations.

To do this it will not be necessary to uncover every last al Qaeda operative—much less to kill every last terrorist worldwide. If we can combine steady progress on the military front with political containment of al Qaeda's ideology, we will make it ever harder for bin Laden to mount mass casualty suicide attacks (especially in conjunction with energetic efforts in homeland defense). In this, the Weather Underground offers an instructive metaphor. The Weathermen's bombing campaign did not end because the FBI arrested its entire membership; some remain at large to this day. Instead, it was the loss of a sympathetic body of supporters and the ensuing recruits and resources that killed the Weathermen as an organization. Many fewer people are willing to risk their lives for an apparently losing cause than will do so in the vanguard of a movement with a future. If we can deny al Qaeda a future by winning the war of ideas, we thus make the military task attainable and victory achievable even if we cannot ever hope to extinguish terrorism as such or annihilate al Qaeda in its entirety.

This war of ideas, moreover, is one in which we enjoy important long-term advantages. Al Qaeda promulgates a repressive, sexist, authoritarian distortion of Islam that is unattractive not only to us, but to the great majority of Muslims as well. Most Muslims—like most Americans—do not want their daughters excluded from education. They do not want women relegated to veils and denied a meaningful life outside the home. They do not believe the state should punish people for the clothes they wear or the music

they enjoy. And they do not see anyone who disagrees with them as an enemy of God whose ideas must be snuffed out and whose life can be taken in the name of Allah. Most Muslims see a God of peace and forgiveness, not a God of hate and violence. The mainstream practice of Islam is today so distant from al Qaeda's twisted extremism that we need only prevent it from being hijacked by a splinter group whose views are now rejected by the majority of Muslims in Arabia and beyond.

We must be careful, however, to avoid waging this war of ideas in ways that give al Qaeda crucial ammunition. Many now worry about this, but see the problem in chiefly military terms: they oppose attacks on Muslim states like Iraq or Syria as alienating potential allies. Valid or not, however, a different danger of at least equal magnitude lies in the conduct of our ideological campaign: we must not abet bin Laden's effort to portray us as cultural imperialists bent on destroying Islam and imposing Western licentiousness. To avoid this implies at least two requirements.

First, we cannot approach this campaign as a war to convert Muslims to our way of life. Our aim must be to promote a third way: neither separatist extremism nor imposed Westernism. Al Qaeda and the Islamic mainstream are now so far apart that many such opportunities should exist for enabling the legitimate religious yearnings of everyday Muslims to see political expression without creating a dualistic struggle with Western ideals. A central strategic challenge will be to identify such alternatives and promote them—especially where these alternatives threaten repressive political regimes whose corruption is seen by mainstream Muslims as inconsistent with their ideals.

Second, we must counter common perceptions of the West now being promulgated in much of the Arab world. We are routinely caricatured as rapacious libertines with no greater moral compass than vulgar materialism. These widely-held misperceptions make stable coexistence and effective opposition to extremist fundamentalism much harder. To overturn them will require a positive effort to provide a more accurate picture of America, our ideals, and our culture. This effort must walk a fine line between informing others and imposing our way of life—but our ability to promote a stable Islamic "third way" that does not define itself in violent opposition to us depends in part on escaping the demonized portrayal of ourselves now so common in the Arab world.

These challenges are not trivial, but they can be surmounted. And the ideological battlefield on which they are to be met is one where we enjoy important advantages if we conduct the campaign properly.

## **How Would We Know When the War has been Won?**

Unlike World War II or Operation DESERT STORM, this war will not end at an appointed hour by the signing of a peace agreement or the declaration of a cease fire. But it can have a discernable ending. Our desired end state is the isolation of a remnant of al Qaeda into a small band of harried individuals living in deep cover as fugitives from the law, cut off from any base of popular support, despairing of any real hope of establishing their views through political power, and with no successor organization waiting in the wings to take up their struggle on behalf of a sympathetic people. Like the Weathermen, al Qaeda's ability to threaten vital American interests would then be broken even if survivors remain, and even if these prove able to mount occasional terrorist incidents of conventional scale. Orthodox terrorism is not an existential threat to America; mass casualty terrorism on the scale of September 11 and the ability to sustain this, by contrast, is not achievable by bands of isolated individuals. The record to date suggests that this requires a degree of organization and profound commitment characteristic only of an institution like al Qaeda, and it is within our power to defeat al Qaeda as an institution even if we cannot kill every individual terrorist in the world.

The arrival of this day will not be apparent at the time, but will become ever clearer as the absence of mass fatality attacks on Americans grows prolonged. Just as the Cold War's end was clear mainly in retrospect, so we can expect that the end of this war will be proclaimed by historians rather than by soldiers. Looking backwards today, we can say that the fall of Communist Poland, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, and the breakup of the Soviet Union signaled a period within which the Cold War ended, though no single event can be said to have provided more than a symbolic finale. Likewise looking forward from today, there will come a time when we can be confident that we have seen the end of al Qaeda, but we cannot expect to be able to proclaim it at any single moment. End, however, it shall—if we formulate our aims and our strategies properly.



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