

# COUNTERTERRORISM AND U.S. POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – CHAPTER 7

PRESIDENT OBAMA should make counterterrorism an integral part of his approach to the Middle East but not the only driver of his regional policy. Terrorist attacks can derail, at times dramatically, an administration's regional objectives and in extreme circumstances can cause tremendous loss of innocent life and reduced public confidence in government.<sup>3</sup> The radicalization that underpins terrorism stemming from the Middle East will make it harder for the new administration to pursue political reform in the region and to enlist regional governments in cooperative endeavors. In addition to these threats to U.S. regional interests, a successful attack carried out on U.S. soil or against American civilians abroad could lead to a significant loss of life and may create domestic political pressures for actions that would be difficult to resist even though this might prove counterproductive. Counterterrorism, therefore, should be seen as a significant policy concern but weighed among many interests. Moreover, counterterrorism does not occur in a vacuum: for it to succeed, other U.S. interests must also advance.

The Obama administration can reduce the threat posed by terrorism by implementing the following policies:

*Strengthen local capacities to counter violent extremism.* Terrorism is best fought by governments in the region, but the United States can play a key role in bolstering their intelligence, police, financial, and other capabilities.

*Help local states apply best practices for deradicalization.* Regional states, particularly Saudi

Arabia, have tried to develop effective means to fight radicalization and stop the rise of militancy. However, regional programs are of uneven quality and some are in their early stages. The United States should encourage use of the most successful methods.

*Avoid, to the extent possible, reinforcing perceptions that the United States is at war with Islam.* Although it is difficult for the United States to send a consistent message, a presidential priority should be to make clear that the U.S. struggle is focused on a relatively small group of violent radicals out of touch with the mainstream of their religion.

*Help ensure that Iraqi refugee camps in Jordan and Syria do not become sources of militancy.* Refugee aid programs and greater government capacity are necessary to reduce the risk that the 2 million Iraqi refugees could over time support violence back in Iraq and become a source of unrest in their host countries.

*If a decision is made to pull out from Iraq, retain U.S. military and intelligence capacity in the country that is sufficient to disrupt al Qaeda activities.* Al Qaeda of Iraq (AQI) is down but not out, and if there is a U.S. drawdown, the president needs to ensure that the capacity remains to operate effectively against AQI.

*Continue to fund the Sunni Awakening in Iraq and press the government of Iraq to bring as many Sunni*

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<sup>3</sup> Dramatic terrorist attacks by militant groups have seriously undermined the reconstitution of Iraq, drove a wedge between the United States and Pakistan, destabilized Afghanistan, complicated U.S.-Saudi relations, and reduced the possibility of an Israeli-Palestinian accord. In Europe, terrorism stemming from the Middle East killed 191 people in Madrid in March 2004 and triggered the fall of Spain's pro-American government.

*volunteers into the security forces as possible so that members do not restore ties to al Qaeda.*

*Counter Hamas and Hezbollah by working with regional allies to strengthen their security-related institutions rather than by directly challenging these deeply rooted movements.*

*Recognize the danger of failed or failing states in the region as incubators of and magnets for terrorist groups. U.S. programs designed to strengthen law enforcement, the judiciary, the police and security services, and other institutions of governance in such states must be augmented.*