

Symposium hosted by
The Saban Center for Middle East Policy

How to Win the War against Terrorism

Thursday, September 22, 2004
9:00am - 2:00pm
Brookings Institution

Panel 1- “Scoring the War against Al-Qa‘ida”

Moderated by: [Daniel L. Byman](#)

Nonresident Senior Fellow, Saban Center for Middle East Policy; Director of the Center for Peace and Security Studies and the Security Studies Program, Georgetown University

Panelists:

[Richard A. Falkenrath](#)

Senior Fellow, [Foreign Policy Studies](#), the Brookings Institution

[Roger W. Cressey](#)

Good Harbor Consulting, former chief of Staff to the President's Critical Infrastructure Protection Board and Director for Transnational Threats, NSC

[Marc Sageman](#)

University of Pennsylvania

Richard Falkenrath began by citing some recent success in the war against terrorism. He noted that al-Qa‘ida is now very different organization as an organization from how it was before 9/11. Many of its top leaders have been killed or captured, and the remaining leadership has shifted much of its focus to just attempting to survive. As a result, al-Qa‘ida’s ability to carry out terrorist operations has been significantly diminished. The US institutions that combat terrorism have also improved. Before 9/11 there were major budget shortfalls, but now they are better funded and have been reorganized to increase their effectiveness. It is important to note that there have been no terrorist attacks inside the United States since 9/11. The American Muslim population has not proven to be a good recruiting ground for terrorists. Falkenrath believes that there are any sleeper cells implanted in the United States from before 9/11.

However, Falkenrath pointed out that there have also been significant failures in the war against terrorism. Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have not been caught and the tribal areas of western Pakistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region provide too much of a safe haven for terrorists. The rate at which the United States is capturing terrorists has decreased and many terrorist training camps around the world continue to operate. Some groups, such as Hizballah in Lebanon, have yet to be affected by the war against terrorism, and U.S. agencies that deal with the terrorist threat are heavily taxed by the demands of U.S. foreign policy. Hizballah is not currently

carrying out attacks against the United States, but Falkenrath argued that if it were active then it could become a greater threat to the US than al-Qa'ida.

The next speaker, Roger Cressey, agreed with Falkenrath that the old al-Qa'ida no longer exists, although he is unsure whether the leadership of al-Qa'ida still retains some control over operations or if it is merely involved in influencing public opinion. According to Cressey, the United States needs to be concerned about the threat posed by local extremists, with few or no ties to the al-Qa'ida leadership. Since 9/11, for example, there has been an increase in the number of terrorists coming out of North Africa. The tempo of terrorist attacks has increased and a greater number of the disaffected around the world is being attracted to *jihadism* . Iraq is becoming a more useful training ground for Sunni Islamist terrorists than Afghanistan was in the past. The old members of al-Qa'ida may remain the major threat to the United States for now, but it is probable that in five to ten years that many of the veterans of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq will turn their attention to attacking the United States homeland. This threat will likely remain, whatever the course of developments in Iraq.

Cressey emphasized that the United States needs to start winning the “war of ideas.” The message that the United States is trying to send to the Middle East—of the importance of democracy and individual liberties—is a good one, but few in the Middle East trust the messenger. The United States needs to delegitimize terrorism in the Middle East. This is a significant challenge for the United States, as it is facing competition from Middle Eastern media outlets, such as Hizbollah’s television station Al Manar, which tolerate, and even encourage, terrorism.

The final speaker, Marc Sageman, suggested that, since 9/11, the United States has been somewhat successful at restraining al-Qa'ida along with some other, older Islamist terrorist groups, such as Jamaa Islamiya. However, he cited the cases of “singletons”, individuals, such as the 17 year old terrorist Yahya Kaduri, who had no linkage to the *jihadists* but who was mobilized by what he had read on the internet. The threat of force may deter those terrorist groups that have an organized leadership, but if there are no leaders then force is a less effective deterrent. The challenge that the United States now faces is working out how to prevent the emergence of a new generation of terrorists that often lacks a leadership. To do this we need to get serious about winning the “war of ideas.”

Discussion

The panel were asked if Usama bin Laden has lost the ability to direct operations. The panelists agreed that there is no clear evidence that al-Qa'ida has been involved in recent terrorist attacks in Europe. However, Cressey said that he was convinced that there was an element of the old al-Qa'ida that is looking to conduct another attack against the United States. Sageman explained that al-Qa'ida has not carried out another terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11 not because of any lack of desire but because of a lack of capability. The moderator, Daniel Byman, asked the panelists if the United States could create divisions among terrorist groups that might weaken them. The panelists suggested that to do this, the United States should continue to use some traditional tactics such as restricting the ability of terrorists to travel, and infiltrating terrorist groups. However, the panelists also suggested that the United States might try some more novel strategies, such as providing young people in the Middle East with an alternative to the

vision of the future being provided by the fundamentalists. Falkenrath also argued that terrorist groups might become distracted in the short term by a civil war in Iraq.