Managing Global Insecurity MGI

Combating International Terrorism
A Managing Global Insecurity Brief

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The prospect of a well-organized network like Al Qaeda gaining access to a nuclear or biological weapon represents a serious threat to US and international security.

The Threat of Terrorism

Terrorism was a constant companion to war and ideological struggle in the 20th century, and at the start of the 21st Al Qaeda represents the most virulent form of the phenomenon yet faced. Unlike most terrorist organizations whose efforts are linked to a specific territorial or ideological struggle, Al Qaeda has defined its relationship to terrorism quite differently. Terrorism is not merely a tactic of Al Qaeda, it is essential to the organization's identity, purpose and strategy. Al Qaeda's targets – the United States, U.S. interests, U.S. allies, the UN and the basic structures of global order – are strategic, and not limited.[1]

No State Can Address Terrorism Alone

No state, however powerful, can defend itself unilaterally against transnational terrorism. Terrorist networks move operatives, money and material across borders and through the crevices of the global economy. Only through extensive cooperation on financial flows, intelligence, and police action can the risk of terrorism be reduced. The most dangerous form of terrorism, involving nuclear and biological weapons, requires the most extensive cooperation.

As a major threat to security and order in the 21st century, terrorism demands a more deliberative and effective response. Extremists will use religion and any other means to attract the disaffected. Countering extremism requires people and nations to buy into a rule-based order with law enforcement structures and intelligence capacity to protect societal interests. The challenge to the next US administration is to harness a vision for international cooperation on counter-terrorism and construct a roadmap for its strategic implementation.

State-of-Play

As the victim of the largest terrorist attack in history and having global reach, the United States should be the leader in cooperative efforts to combat terrorism. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the US enjoyed support for robust action against Al Qaeda from a broad coalition that encompassed

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[1] Al Qaeda has, in addition, the more focused objective of overthrowing secular Arab governments, especially those backed by the US – including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan.

all the major powers and much of the Arab world. And the months after 9/11 saw new energy at the UN and in regional organizations to fill gaps in the normative, legal and institutional infrastructure of effective counter-terrorism. The war in Iraq, however, destroyed that unity of purpose. Moreover, rhetoric on "Islamic terrorism" has alienated even trusted allies in the Muslim world. The US Administration's rejection of international law – from flirting with torture to the "un-signing" of the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court and U.S. detention centers in Guantanamo – has evoked distrust from all corners.

By July 2007, the US National Intelligence Estimate on Al Qaeda made clear that the US occupation in Iraq had, among other effects, led to the creation of a major offshoot, Al Qaeda in Iraq, estimated by the National Intelligence Council to be the strongest of Al Qaeda's affiliates—capable of directly attacking the United States.[2] The invasion of Iraq, according to the Estimate, had also created a training ground for a new generation of sophisticated, Al Qaeda-inspired Jihadis, and had distracted the US from the key battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. This last effect is the most dangerous. The Taliban and Al Qaeda central are now resurgent inside a safe haven and newly capable of posing an ongoing threat to the United States. They have mounted an increasing challenge to Pakistan, a populous Muslim state with a critical role in the stability of West Asia – and nuclear weapons.

At present, international mechanisms to promote state and collective action against terrorism are comprehensive but not authoritative. State responsibilities are increasingly well articulated, through UN Security Council resolutions, the General Assembly's unanimously adopted counter-terrorism strategy, and regional declarations. However, of these, only the Security Council's elements are authoritative. Some 70 formal and informal bodies now pursue counter-terrorism, leading to an ad hoc and largely improvisational response. Little has been done to develop effective mechanisms for building local capacity to combat terrorism or to support local strategies.

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[2] By mid 2008, the 'Sunni Awakening' movement backed by the US military surge had made inroads in combating Al Qaeda in Iraq; how durably remains to be seen.

Responsible Sovereignty. MGI proposes a vision for international cooperation based on the principle of responsible sovereignty. The United States must be seen as acting responsibly to create both confidence in the United States and the willingness on the part of others to reciprocate. It derives from the understanding that it is in adhering to a rule-based international system that the United States gains legitimacy and the ability to seek reciprocal behavior by others. No country will gain more from the protection that derives from a strong international legal regime than the United States.

The struggle against terrorism rests on four facets of responsible sovereignty: effective strategies to combat terrorism require states to fulfill universal responsibilities not to sponsor, aid or abet transnational terrorism; to take responsibility for the external impacts of conditions within their borders; to take responsibility for the well-being of their citizens and therefore diminish the risk of terrorism; and to build adequate capacity to implement their responsibilities. This last point, on state capacity, underscores that powerful states have an incentive based on self-interest, as well as a positive responsibility, to assist weak states. If states want to create an international system that helps them protect the territory within each of their borders, they need the cooperation of all states. That creates an imperative to build the capabilities of even the weakest links in the chain.

An Effective Response

Effectively combating international terrorism rests a shift in US strategy and the emergence of a new counter-terrorism regime. The credibility and capacity of global counter terrorism efforts will continue to fall short without a shift from the US to a multifaceted strategy, including four core elements:

1) The US should shift strategy towards a specific war against Al Qaeda and its affiliates, continuing offensive operations against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan – including by devoting the necessary resources and attention to that operation – and sanctioning individuals and states that support or facilitate Al Qaeda operations.

2) The US should support local strategies, where that support is requested, against local or sub-regional terrorist groups or networks. After Al Qaeda, four clusters demand

attention, roughly in order of importance: in the Levant, in East Asia, in the Horn of Africa, and in northern Latin America.

3) The US should continue to improve its tactical cooperation against terrorism – with police, intelligence, and financing investigators – at the bilateral level, and to build multilateral capabilities to support this cooperation.

4) The US should engage in a broad diplomatic effort to bring peace and stability to the Middle East. (*See MGI policy brief on the Middle East*).[3]

An effective response against both the Al Qaeda threat and terrorism more generally will require extensive international cooperation and infrastructure. Stronger capabilities are needed to authorize and support offensive efforts against Al Qaeda; to build national capacity and support local strategies against terrorism; to implement a robust legal and normative framework; to further articulate state responsibilities; and to support tactical cooperation on intelligence and financing.

We support the creation of a new organization that could help to expand the scale and improve the quality of national counter-terrorism strategies. Such an organization, grounded in existing treaties and agreed international frameworks, could also set standards for state action and monitor state performance. To be efficient, it should build on existing capacities, such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and operate in a manner that reinforces the central role of the UN Security Council on threats to international peace and security. Although there are many forms such an organization could take, effectiveness and legitimacy would best be combined by the creation of a **High Commissioner for Counter-Terrorism,** modeled on the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Since High Commissioners are senior UN appointees (at the Under-Secretary-General level), identified by the Secretary-General but endorsed by the Governing Board, a UN High Commission for Counter-Terrorism would have the political weight within the UN system to coordinate efforts to build capacity, improve training, and to coordinate with other UN and international bodies that are central to the counter terrorism agenda. It would also have the political standing to engage with the NGO community and to create the means to assess and follow up on NGO reports and findings,

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[3] Neglect of human rights considerations in its counter-terrorism relationships with authoritarian regimes has seriously dented US standing on human rights and democratization issues generally. The United States and the international community must find a formula that allows them to sustain what seem contradictory policies: support for human rights and indigenous democratic movements, and engagement with national authorities (sometimes authoritarian) against terrorism. The only way to manage such a dilemma is to be open about the contradictions, and be clear about the purposes, while recognizing that democracy must be internally driven and cannot be imposed.

and translate these into programmatic implications. It would depoliticize and enhance the technical, capacity-building focus of the current effort and prioritize attention to those regions that lack the necessary institutional capacities to address the threat effectively. And it would develop a more holistic approach to countering the threat – that is, one that includes strategies for addressing terrorism's underlying conditions.

Lessons From Afghanistan and Iraq. Local, specific strategies must include:

1. Eroding the support for terrorist organizations – using political, human rights, community development and other strategies specific to the context.
2. Isolating and creating costs for state supporters of terrorist organizations – using regional and international legal and political mechanisms to isolate, penalize and ultimately sanction state supporters of terrorism.
3. Denying safe havens – in part by using peacekeeping and peacebuilding capacities to restore government control over territory where it has eroded.
4. Using advanced police, not military, methods to prevent, deter and capture terrorist leaders, gain intelligence and halt terrorist finances.
5. Persuading communities to withhold local support – using local leaders, education systems and other means to reduce the extent to which the social context animates support for terrorists.
6. Defending human rights.

US leadership & Political Momentum Towards a New Regime

The US taking a lead role in reshaping the institutional counter-terrorism architecture would go a long way to reassuring other countries that its commitment to rebuilding international order is real. Supporting a new global counter-terrorism body within the UN would clearly show such resolve, and it would make the United States and others safer from terrorism.

Movement on this, however, cannot be delivered by the US alone. Here we see a role for the establishment of a G16. As we see it, the G16 would serve in part as a confidence-building forum,

strengthened by its regionally balanced membership – the G8, the outreach five (Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa) and three additional countries: Indonesia, Turkey and Egypt. It would build on the G8's vitality in achieving tactical cooperation against terrorists, and it would address the political limitations on that cooperation. G16 initiatives can build on and extend both the reach and legitimacy of prior G8 actions on counter-terrorism.[4] An international architecture that is both strengthened and streamlined can help both to promote standards of responsibility in counter-terrorism and to build national capacity and support local strategies.

Pre-negotiation among the G16 on the parameters of a new High Commission could establish a solid basis on which to enter GA negotiations required for its creation. Broad agreement among the G16 would help ensure that GA negotiations were fruitful, building support and legitimacy but not veering away from core requirements of effectiveness and efficiency.

Early action of a new US President would also serve to show that the US is committed to a rule-based international order and a new regime on counter-terrorism. The next American President must make clear that the United States will uphold the articles of the Geneva Conventions, the Convention Against Torture and other laws of war. The 44th President should immediately close the Guantanamo Detention facility and charge, transfer or release its detainees. Other leaders should also take heed – the United States will need help to work out where and how to hold detainees that pose a real international threat. The United States will need to work simultaneously toward a sustainable solution to detention of suspected terrorists, protecting Americans against terrorist attacks while abiding by international law and affording human right protection.

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[4] In the midst of this rather muddling performance by formal bodies, the G8 has been a useful venue for promoting cooperation on tactical counter-terrorism, in law enforcement and financing, and for spawning new, informal tools for cooperation, such as the Proliferation and Container Security Initiatives. Its work has been limited by its lack of widespread legitimacy in the global south.