It's the Ideology, Stupid

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Articles & Testimony

The United States cannot simply capture and kill its way out of the global terrorism problem; it must find a way to take on the extremist ideology directly.

Today, it would be fair to say that U.S. counterterrorism efforts are tactically strong. We are well-positioned to tap the right phones, carry out surveillance of the right targets, and as a result we have a truly remarkable track record of preventing attacks (though some, like the shoe bomber, underwear bomber and Times Square bomber, simply failed without being foiled). Where we remain inexcusably weak, however, is in the realm of strategic counterterrorism, or counter-radicalization. Today's threat has metamorphosed from the al-Qaeda core to franchises like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), jihadi groups trying to earn their stripes (like those in Egypt's Sinai Desert), and -- most disturbingly -- homegrown violent extremists who are radicalized online or in person in places like Minnesota and Northern Virginia.

Since 9/11, U.S. efforts to counter radical Islamism at home and abroad have focused on expanding global engagement and strategic communication abroad, as well as community engagement and town hall meetings with immigrant communities at home. Beyond engagement, counterterrorism officials have concentrated not only on preventing plots from being hatched but on developing fissures among al-Qaeda, affiliated terror groups and their supporters.

Engagement and counterterrorism initiatives are critical, but the wide space between them must be addressed. Missing are policies and programs that contest the extremist narrative of radicalizers; empower and network mainstream voices already countering extremism; and promote the free exchange of ideas and publicly challenge extremist voices and ideas. Counter radicalization is an essential complement to counterterrorism. The latter we do relatively well; the former we hardly do at all.

Over the past ten years, counterterrorism successes have been impressive. Improved offensive counterterrorism efforts take the fight to al-Qaeda, reducing its ability to carry out spectacular attacks in the West and limiting the capabilities of its affiliates. Indeed, counterterrorism officials are far more skilled at collecting intelligence on al-Qaeda than they were before the 9/11 attacks, and both human sources and technical coverage have improved dramatically. It took a decade, but the intelligence community finally accomplished what some feared was impossible: finding the needle in a haystack. The loss of Bin Laden is more than just the loss of a household name; it is a major blow to the morale of al-Qaeda foot soldiers and the stability of the al-Qaeda core.

Bin Laden's death could mark a turning point in the decade-long global struggle against terrorism. Such success can breed further ones; officials believe, for example, that the punishing campaign of drone attacks on militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas has undermined their allegiance to al-Qaeda and other militant groups and contributed to the ability of intelligence officials to recruit assets and informers. Bin Laden's death strips him of the mystique of the invulnerable chief successfully eluding Western intelligence while his group continues to carry out attacks worldwide.

In addition to tracking down al-Qaeda's leader, counterterrorism officials have had success in targeting al-Qaeda's financial networks and disrupting the flow of money that supports its activities. According to the Treasury Department, al-Qaeda is in the worst financial shape in years thanks to strong and enduring mechanisms in the ongoing effort to combat terrorist financing.

But despite Bin Laden's death, his legacy continues to present an acute threat to the West. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian physician-turned-terrorist who succeeded Bin Laden as chief of al-Qaeda, recently delivered a message which indicated that the organization, though weakened, will not stop its efforts against western countries. In a video message, Zawahiri called for new attacks against the U.S., referring to the nation as a criminal country. He also suggested that the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia have provided al-Qaeda an opportunity to spread its message.

On the heels of the Arab Spring, al-Qaeda faces new challenges with inspiring recruits. The large numbers of Arab protesters have demonstrated that their agenda does not embrace al-Qaeda's nihilistic ideology and worldview. The Middle East is looking not toward al-Qaeda, which offers no attractive alternative to the status quo, but toward technocratic political reformers, who offer a concrete platform for near-term change. In a matter of weeks, relatively peaceful protestors in Egypt and Tunisia were able to bring down their governments, something al-Qaeda and its ilk failed to accomplish through many years of indiscriminate violence.

And still, the threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates remains. Al-Qaeda and its franchises and affiliates such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Lashkar e-Taiba as well as homegrown extremists inspired by al-Qaeda's radical narrative and ideology remain intent and, to varying degrees, capable of carrying out terrorist attacks. In an August 16th interview with CNN, President Obama stressed that pressure has left Al-Qaeda "a much weaker organization with much less capability than they had just two or three years ago." As a result, he outlined, spectacular attacks are less likely, but small scale attacks may be more frequent. "The most likely scenario that we have to guard against right now ends up being more of a lone wolf operation than a large, well-coordinated terrorist attack," the President warned. Indeed, radicalization and recruitment has changed so significantly that, according to FBI Assistant Director for Counterterrorism Mark Giuliano, "Thousands of extremist websites promote violence to a worldwide audience predisposed to the extremist message, and more of these websites and U.S. citizens are involved in internet radicalization." And the environment in which people are predisposed to extremist ideology is geographically and demographically diverse. "We have seen internet radicalization in individuals as young as fourteen years old," Giuliano noted.

Whether Bin Laden is dead or alive, some of these organized terrorists and homegrown violent extremists will continue to demonstrate a resolve to take overt, operational steps to carry out terrorist actions. In short, the terrorist threat has not diminished so much as it has expanded to include attacks by less coordinated, more dispersed franchises and homegrown terrorists.

Consider, for example, the growing number of radicalized U.S. citizens and residents, some of whom have traveled abroad to join the global jihad. Consider the Somali Americans who have fought with the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab, as well as other Americans who have traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan for similar purposes. Some individuals have derived inspiration, direction, or training from abroad to plan attacks at home, such as Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan and Najibullah Zazi, who planned to bomb the New York subway system. Others still have been involved in schemes to provide material and financial support to terrorist groups; consider Mohammad Younis, a Long Island man, who pleaded guilty to

running a "hawala," an unlicensed money-transfer operation that helped fund attempted Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad and Wesam El-Hanafi, a Brooklyn man accused of allegedly purchasing seven digital watches to send to AQAP.

Despite losing safe havens and facing financial difficulties, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its followers remain capable of recruiting foot soldiers and executing attacks. Yet specific policies and programs aimed squarely at countering the radical narrative remain few and far between, even amid a sharp increase in terrorist plots and homegrown radicalization cases. It is axiomatic that the United States cannot simply capture and kill its way out of the problem; it must find a way to take on the extremist ideology directly.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's ***Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence (/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr*** *and author of* Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God *(forthcoming). This article also appears in the next issue of* JISA, *whose contents center on the theme "9/11 + 10."* ❖

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