Defeating al-Qaeda and Neutralizing Its Support Network

Jun 17, 2009

Brief Analysis

In mid-June, a group of tourists visiting Yemen's tribal areas were brutally murdered by terrorists most likely connected to al-Qaeda. This tragic event underscores a particularly difficult challenge for the United States and its allies: as al-Qaeda's activities are undermined in one part of the world, it adapts and moves its operations elsewhere. Yemen and Somalia -- where the al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab movement is now a major force -- are the latest examples of this phenomenon. To thwart al-Qaeda's versatility, our counterterrorism strategy must adapt to the terrorist organization's changing modus operandi and theaters of battle. We also need to improve our ability to counter asymmetrical threats, which require more than just a military response. Against a foe like al Qaeda which operates in the shadows, it's intelligence that is crucial to defeating them. It is therefore crucial that we use the best and most effective intelligence-collection methods, and that our key counterterrorism agencies work seamlessly together.

Evolution of al-Qaeda

Prior to the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda conducted a series of strikes designed to carry out Usama bin Laden's 1996 "declaration of war" on the United States. Although the attacks started with the East Africa embassy bombings in 1998, it was not until the carnage of September 11 that bin Laden's true intent hit home. At that time, al-Qaeda's network acted like a state in many ways: it had a highly centralized command-and-control structure and a defined territorial sanctuary.

After the United States realized that a group of individuals had carried out violent acts on a scale, and with a level of sophistication, previously only achievable by organized states, we responded decisively, effectively dismantling what was then considered al-Qaeda's "center of gravity." The terrorist network, however, quickly adapted. Events after the 2001 fall of the Taliban government in Afghanistan provided an opportunity for bin Laden's group to reinvent itself and evolve into a more lethal form. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave bin Laden a revived platform to reinforce his justification for the war against the United States, challenging Muslims to fight what he described as a Crusader invasion of Muslim lands.

Al-Qaeda also played on the widespread fear that a Shiite-dominated Iraq would extend Iranian influence to the primarily Sunni regions of the Gulf Arab states, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the rest of the Muslim world. In turn, for many Sunnis, supporting the insurgency in Iraq -- as a means of targeting invading Western forces and countering the growing strength and influence of Shiites in Iran and now Iraq -- became as legitimate as supporting the Afghan mujahedin had been twenty years before against the Soviets.

And when al-Qaeda's campaign began to weaken in Iraq -- after Gen. David Petraeus's strategy of applying political warfare tactics helped to include Sunnis in the political and security future of Iraq and eased their fears -- the terrorist organization slowly carved out a safe haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In sum, instead of the centralized command and control that had been al-Qaeda's trademark prior to September 11, the organization switched to a greater emphasis from being the "chief operator" to taking the role of "chief

motivator." The terror network's focus turned to manipulating regional, local, tribal, and sectarian conflicts to promote its interests. It also "franchised" the al-Qaeda name and encouraged other terrorist groups in places such as North Africa, South East Asia, the Middle East, as well as those that emerged later, in places like Iraq, to operate under the al-Qaeda's banner.

New Sanctuaries

While the U.S. focus has been on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, al-Qaeda's efforts to broaden and shift its theaters of operation have continued, with a particular focus on Yemen and Somalia.

Yemen's weak central government and powerful regional tribes, which in many ways act as autonomous mini-governments, make Yemen an easy place for al-Qaeda to operate. Some tribes are sympathetic to al-Qaeda's aims while others are willing to assist the group for reasons ranging from monetary reward to help in battles with rival tribes.

In Somalia, with the world's focus on piracy, radical jihadists now have one of the largest territories from which to operate since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Influenced by al-Qaeda, a group known al-Shabab (the youths) aims to create a Taliban-style Islamic state in Somalia, and since Ethiopian troops withdrew from Somalia earlier this year, the group has taken control of important towns and is now battling the government in the capital Mogadishu.

Eliminating the al-Qaeda Support System

To counter asymmetrical threats, U.S. strategy cannot be limited to the military option, but must utilize all available tools, including diplomacy, intelligence, military force, covert special operations, law enforcement, psychological and cultural programs, and economic assistance. An asymmetrical organization cannot survive without a strong support system. The actual bomb placers and suicide bombers are few; they depend, however, on a ring of supporters for money, supplies, safe houses, travel documents, transportation, and other services. The U.S. strategy should aim to decrease the size of this outer ring as the most effective route to combat the most dangerous individuals at the center. The smaller the ring, the more successful the United States will be.

Unfortunately, the wrong strategy can increase the size of this outer ring, leading to additional sympathy and support, and consequently to more terrorist recruits. Images of Abu Ghraib, allegations of torture, and harsh interrogation techniques, for example, are counterproductive when trying to win hearts and minds. Such tactics produce a no-win situation: they weakened U.S. moral standing and undercut the positive message the United States was attempting to disseminate. In addition, using enhanced interrogation techniques on a subject trained to anticipate torture and resist questioning is counterproductive to the goal of eliciting accurate and reliable information. It's a lose-lose scenario.

Closing Guantanamo

The Obama administration's promise to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, affords us an opportunity to finally deal with the detainees held there and give the world an important lesson in American justice.

Of the estimated 250 prisoners at Guantanamo, the United States has enough evidence to try and convict some of the detainees. One such example is Abdulrahim al-Nashiri, a Yemeni, known also as Mullah Billal, who was one of al-Qaeda's top field commanders and headed operations in the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Nashiri could be tried and convicted without using any information provided under harsh techniques.

Some detainees can be tried in military courts; for others, enough evidence exists to try them in regular U.S. courts. Solid evidence exists, for example, against Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, a Tanzanian, to convict him for participating in the 1998 East African embassy bombings.

The final group of detainees includes those for whom evidence does not exist to convict them, either because they are lower ranking and just at the start of their terrorist careers, or because they simply should not be there in the first place. Ultimately, these prisoners need to be released into secure rehabilitation programs. The United States should send detainees to their native countries, where we trust them. Otherwise, detainees can be sent to allied countries that have strong rehabilitation programs.

Division of Labor between FBI and CIA

To successfully leverage all elements of national power against the threat from terrorism, we need to repair the division of labor between our intelligence and law enforcement agencies so that each is doing what it does best. While the FBI's expertise involves collecting evidence, following leads, unraveling criminal enterprises, questioning suspects, and putting together cases for trial, the CIA's main expertise is intelligence collection. The FBI operates knowing that all the evidence it collects may at some point need to stand up in court, while the CIA, by necessity, works in secrecy. Therefore, if the CIA is in charge of interrogations and counterterrorism investigations, either secrecy or justice is sacrificed -- neither of which being desirable. As such, the FBI should be the lead agency in collecting evidence, questioning terrorists, and building a case for potential trials, while the CIA should focus on what it does best, namely, collecting intelligence.

Ali Soufan, an FBI supervisory special agent from 1997 to 2005, was one of the lead investigators and interrogators in major international terrorism cases, including the 1998 Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen. ❖

Policy #1536

RECOMMENDED

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before

Feb 16, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter

Feb 16, 2022

◆

Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)