Where We've Come since 9/11

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Articles & Testimony

As the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaches, and with the Bush administration entering its final months, it's worth pausing to reflect on how much progress we've made these past seven years against the terrorist threat to the United States. Yet the next administration will face an evolving terrorist threat and inherit a counterterrorism regime that is still a work in progress.

While the United States has overhauled its counterterrorism structure to face this new, ever-evolving enemy, keeping up with the adapting threat is a serious challenge for the often plodding government bureaucracy.

At the time of the Sept. 11 attacks, al Qaeda was a centralized, hierarchical organization that directed international terrorist operations from its base in Afghanistan. By 2004, al Qaeda appeared to be in disarray, with its capabilities dramatically diminished. That picture has changed substantially over the past few years, as al Qaeda's center has grown stronger once again, with its new safe haven in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where it can train and recruit operatives, and direct its global propaganda efforts.

Al Qaeda has also successfully expanded its reach through partnerships with other organizations throughout the Middle East and North Africa. These affiliates include al Qaeda in Iraq, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.

Finally, there are more local groups today inspired by al Qaeda, even if they have no direct ties. Last month, Ted Gistaro, the U.S. government's senior counterterrorism analyst observed that al Qaeda is still working hard to motivate these "homegrown" groups to follow its lead. More than 40 organizations announced formation and pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden between January 2005 and April 2007.

In the years following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, the United States focused on taking aggressive action and maintaining a hard line with foreign governments. This was reflected in the four counterterrorism policy principles outlined in the State Department's 2004 annual terrorism report: make no concessions to terrorists and strike no deals; bring terrorists to justice; isolate and pressure state sponsors of terrorism; and improve allies' counterterrorism capabilities.

Today, the U.S. government is more focused on using all elements of national power to combat terrorism. As the State Department acknowledged in its 2007 annual terrorism report, "incarcerating or killing terrorists will not achieve an end to terrorism." Instead, the government now pairs the use of military power with "soft power" tools, including diplomatic engagement and increased funding for agencies employing non-military tools.

There is increased recognition that putting out the right message must be an integral part of the counterterrorism strategy, because we are fighting an adversary that uses the Internet as a tool for recruitment and mass communication. The United States now realizes that discrediting the terrorists can have real-world implications, impacting their recruitment, donations and support within the world's Muslim communities. In the words of Mike Leiter, the director of National Counterterrorism Center, "showing the barbarism of groups like al Qaeda in the light of truth is, ultimately, our strongest weapon."

The U.S. government's counterterrorism structure has also changed significantly since Sept. 11. The intelligence reform act in 2004 was the most major overhaul of the U.S. national security apparatus since 1947. The centerpiece of this legislation was the establishment of the position of director of national intelligence -- the official now charged with leading the 16 agencies of the U.S. intelligence community.

The National Counterterrorism Center, also created by the 2004 bill, serves as the government's intelligence fusion center -- the place where counterterrorism analysts from all of the key agencies can "connect the dots." The center also leads the U.S. government's strategic operational planning efforts against terrorism, an endeavor that addresses the criticism that the government had no real strategy to fight al Qaeda prior to Sept. 11.

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security, meanwhile, was an even more herculean task, combining 22 different agencies with more than 180,000 employees, which were responsible for issues ranging from customs and immigration to emergency management and airport security. Four years later, the government is still struggling to define these new agencies' counterterrorism roles and missions, in part because the agencies that have been working on these issues for decades haven't always welcomed these new arrivals to the scene, and disputes have arisen.

Unfortunately, despite its oversight responsibilities, Congress has not been well positioned to help resolve these important disputes, because it continues to be involved in turf battles of its own. While the 9/11 Commission recommended that Congress "create a single, principal point of oversight and review for homeland security," this recommendation has gone unheeded, and more than 80 congressional committees and subcommittees still oversee Homeland Security alone today. This is hardly a recipe for effective oversight.

The next administration will have to evaluate whether the United States is now on the right path -- in terms of our strategy and our structure -- or whether to chart another course. It will also need to recognize that with such a rapidly evolving threat, one cannot assume that strategies adopted today will be as successful tomorrow. In fact, al Qaeda and other like-minded groups have been adapting so rapidly that the picture may look somewhat different by January 2009.

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