

# Winning the War on Terror: Marking Success and Confronting Challenges

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

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## How does the U.S. government assess the state of the war on terror, and how does it define success?

*On April 23, 2008, Juan Zarate, deputy national security advisor for combating terrorism, addressed a Washington Institute Policy Forum. The following are his prepared remarks.*

**T**hank you to Rob Satloff, Michael Stein, and The Washington Institute for the kind invitation to speak today. It has been almost a year since I was here last to talk about the ideological underpinnings of terrorism. I am pleased to be back to build on those remarks. I also want to thank my former colleagues Matt Levitt and Michael Jacobson who continue to contribute to the scholarship on terrorism.

The Institute should be proud of the continued series of high-level, national security-related discussions you have sponsored. In this most recent series of talks, you have heard from three key U.S. counterterrorism officials -- Ambassador Dell Dailey, National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) acting director Michael Leiter, and Treasury assistant secretary Pat O'Brien. I am honored to work with these leaders every day to prosecute the U.S. government's fight against al-Qaida and its like-minded allies.

From all of these speakers, you have heard about different dimensions of the comprehensive U.S. strategy to combat terrorism. Today, I would like to do three things: (1) highlight some counterterrorism innovations within the U.S. government; (2) discuss certain core markers of success we are witnessing in the War on Terror; and (3) delineate the seminal challenges in bringing closure to the "Long War."

Since 9/11, the President has laid out a clear strategy and vision -- to wage a battle of arms and ideas -- that has been implemented by thousands of men and women protecting our national and homeland security at home and abroad. It is an approach built on both an aggressive attack on the enemy and its ideology and a strong layered defense.

This integrated strategy is supported by a counterterrorism architecture built by this President and Congress to enable the U.S. government to win the war on terror in the long term. Now, we have in place the structures -- like NCTC, the Department of Homeland Security, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, NORTHCOM, DOJ's National Security Divisions, the FBI's National Security Branch, and Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI) -- that institutionalize the counterterrorism and homeland defense missions.

In addition, we have much of the legal framework -- based on the Patriot Act, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorist Prevention Act (IRTPA), and other key administrative and legal provisions -- to fight this long war effectively. A key piece of legislation -- the modernization of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) -- remains to be passed in Congress.

These efforts have had real world effects and impact. In the first instance, they have saved lives. Along with our partners abroad, we have disrupted numerous al-Qaida-led and inspired plots, made countless terrorism-related arrests globally, and disrupted the logistical and financial networks of al-Qaida and its allies. The ongoing trial in London of the failed August 2006 airline plotters highlights the reality of the threats and disruptions plainly enough.

## Counterterrorism Innovations

**T**hese efforts have allowed us to remain innovative and on the offense -- along with our partners -- against an adaptive transnational enemy. This innovation in our current strategy and approach has manifested itself in many ways.

- The information sharing environment in which we now operate is vastly different from the one that existed just six years ago. The walls between intelligence and law enforcement, between federal, state, and local authorities, and even between foreign counterparts have fallen or been minimized in a way previously unimagined. In addition, more data is being gathered, shared, and analyzed. This has meant that more dots have and can be connected to identify suspect terrorist nodes, networks, and problematic trends.
- Today, the U.S. government's counter-threat response infrastructure -- led by NCTC -- is a system in which all of the key departments and agencies convene three times a day to review threats, once a week at the White House in the Counterterrorism Security Group to ensure we are addressing the high-level threats of concern, and then at the most senior levels of government when warranted. The President's daily intelligence briefings routinely include strategic and tactical terrorism matters, and he receives regular counterterrorism and homeland security updates from Cabinet Secretaries and agency heads. This system -- with top level attention -- ensures constant focus on emerging or lingering threats of concern.
- We have built an interlocking system of defenses -- extending our borders and homeland security. This starts with strong overseas partnerships and focused programs intended to prevent unwanted people and materials from reaching our shores -- such as the Container Security Initiative, the Proliferation Security Initiative, and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. Such programs and relationships are backed by robust counter-terrorist travel and screening efforts, which are then amplified by port and border security measures. This layer of defense is then backed by critical infrastructure protection in the Homeland and joint partnerships with state, local, and tribal law enforcement. It is not just one part of our homeland defense that matters but instead the layered defense in depth that is critical to the success of this model -- taking full advantage of international and local partnerships.
- This President has led the focus on preventing terrorists from acquiring, developing, or using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) -- in particular nuclear weapons. He has laid out a six-part strategy, backed by an in-depth

implementation plan and related programs, that links our counterproliferation and counterterrorism efforts and communities into a comprehensive approach. This includes everything from protection of nuclear materials globally and radiological screening overseas to interdiction efforts and building capabilities to attribute the source of any such attack. This approach has led to innovations such as rethinking how we can deter or dissuade elements of terrorist networks. This includes undercutting the moral and religious legitimacy of the use of WMD by terrorists against innocents.

- Our counterterrorism strategy has depended on the use of all elements of national power, now integrated in a common planning document, the National Implementation Plan. Our approach has led to innovations in the use of our resources. This has included targeted development assistance with allies in safe havens of concerns and core capacity building with law enforcement, intelligence, and military counterparts to ensure our partners have the indigenous capabilities to fight the sources and symptoms of terrorism. It has also included creative deployment of our powers and suasion, as in the case of our use of targeted financial sanctions to identify and isolate rogue actors and to rely heavily on the international financial community in doing so.
- In our tactical and strategic engagement in the battle of ideas, we have adapted our approach to focus not just on defending the image of America and encouraging the underlying values of free societies but also attacking and undercutting the image and ideology of the enemy. This includes working with key allies -- in governments and the private sector -- to ensure the truth about al-Qaida's atrocities is revealed and understood. We are also connecting the private sector, NGOs, and interested parties to develop grass-roots initiatives throughout the world that provide hope to youth and allow moderate networks to connect and defend against violent extremist ideologies. These are innovative projects intended to grow the grassroots countermovement that will counter extremist ideologues and their message.

These are just a handful of innovations and efforts that mark the every day work of the U.S. government to implement our counterterrorism strategy. No doubt, improvements and further innovations need to be made, but we now have a U.S. counterterrorism architecture that allows us to fight the long war effectively, using all elements of national power.

While we implement this strategy, a key question that we must consistently ask ourselves is: Are we on the right track toward winning the War on Terror?

I am paid to see and prevent the worst in the terrorism tea leaves. Sometimes daily setbacks or longer term challenges appear to portend a protracted battle with a morphing enemy on numerous fronts. There may indeed be difficult streaks in the WOT, but I am also an optimist. I think we are now seeing important signs that mark progress in the War on Terror and point to the eventual demise of al-Qaida.

## **Nature of the Enemy**

**T**o understand whether we are winning, one must understand the evolving nature of the enemy. We continue to face an enemy, led by al-Qaida, that is patient in its long term strategic vision and willing to use any means to achieve its goals. Though its goals are global, it uses and co-opts local and cultural grievances and national movements and aspirations to fuel recruitment and establish its legitimacy. Their extremist and exclusive ideology preys on discontent and alienation, while providing a simple narrative that pretends to grant meaning and heroic outlet for the young. It is a terrorist movement that rejects elements of modernity while being fully devoted to using its implements, like the Internet.

Over the last three years, we have seen a hybrid face for this enemy emerge -- with al-Qaida core leadership setting the strategic direction for the movement and often directing attack planning. At the same time, al-Qaida has aggressively and systematically moved to establish and use outposts, like al-Qaida in Iraq or al-Qaida in the Islamic

Maghreb, that serve as forward bases for al-Qaida activity and strategic reach. In addition, al-Qaida has identified and nurtured pockets of radicalized cells or individuals in Western Europe with the capability to carry out deadly attacks under al-Qaida direction and in its name. Despite our disruptions and aggressive counterterrorism actions against al-Qaida leadership, this movement has found ways of extending its reach beyond the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

This is an enemy that is morphing in structure and adapting to changing geopolitical landscapes, but one that retains the same radical vision and ideology and devotion to the use of terrorism.

## Markers of Success

**T**hough this enemy appears to be reaching deeper into North Africa and Europe, there are a number of important developments that signal that al-Qaida and the movement it represents are under greater stress and finding more opposition to its program, in particular by Muslims affected directly by al-Qaida's tactics. The international environment for al-Qaida, including in Muslim majority countries, is growing more inhospitable.

There are some basic markers to note.

The consistent and frequent terrorist-related arrests being made -- and underreported -- around the world are an important signal of the growing seriousness with which countries take the threat. European services have arrested and disrupted numerous terrorist networks over the past year, to include operational cells wrapped up in Germany, Denmark, and Turkey. This is an indicator of both the awareness and growing effectiveness of countries' counterterrorism capabilities.

Countries are further addressing the counterterrorism threat themselves and with regional partners. This has entailed more than just classic counterterrorism work, to include more countries taking the field in the ideological battle space. This is seen most vividly in Southeast Asia, where the countries in the region have adopted full-fledged counterterrorism strategies -- from "soft" counter-radicalization and jihadi rehabilitation programs to the development of "harder" special forces capabilities to address militants and terrorists on the battlefield. This approach and related regional partnerships signal an important graduation for the international community in reducing the global reach of the terrorist groups in the region.

Most importantly, there has been a growing rejection of the al-Qaida program and message. This is manifesting itself in several important ways.

- This is seen most vividly in Iraq, with the heart of al-Qaida's supposed constituency -- the Sunni Arab tribes -- openly and violently rejecting al-Qaida's presence and ideology. The Al Anbar Awakening -- with its broader ramifications for a rejection in the Arab heartland of al-Qaida itself -- represents an existential threat to the al-Qaida program. Its long term strategy of establishing an "Islamic Caliphate", galvanizing a broader anti-Western Muslim movement, and driving the United States out of the region stands at risk. Combined with our military surge and the tactical pressure we have put on anti-coalition forces in Iraq, we have al-Qaida in retreat in Iraq. This is precisely why we have seen al-Qaida trying to regroup with targeted attacks on the tribal sheikhs and a flurry of messages from senior al-Qaida leadership about the need for unity and concentrated and primary effort in Iraq.
- Importantly, this rejection has started to emerge within extremist circles as well. Recently, former jihadist leaders of the Egyptian Islamic Group published a series of books highly critical of jihadists and al-Qaida, to which Ayman al Zawahiri has felt compelled to respond directly. The prominent Saudi cleric Shaykh Salman bin Fahd al-Awdah, who is well respected in extremist circles, condemned al-Qaida's actions and their impact on Islam in an open letter to Usama bin Laden, asking "How much blood has been spent? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed, dispersed, or evicted in the name of al-Qaida?" And in London just yesterday, former extremists have launched the Quilliam Foundation, an organization dedicated to exposing and discrediting the ideology and voices of

violent extremism.

- This rejection is not isolated to Iraq or to extremist circles. More and more Muslim and Arab populations -- to include clerics and scholars -- are questioning the value of al-Qaida's program and al-Qaida's fomenting of chaos and its justification for the killing of Muslim innocents. In an article published in the Washington Post, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar Mosque in Egypt noted that "attacking civilians, women, children, and the elderly by blowing oneself up is absolutely forbidden in Islam. No excuse can be made for the crimes committed in New York, Spain, and London, and anyone who tries to make excuses for these acts is ignorant of Islamic law, and their excuses are the result of extremism and ignorance." In October 2007, the Saudi Grand Mufti, Shaykh Abdul Aziz, delivered a speech warning Saudis not to undertake unauthorized jihadist activities and blamed "foreign elements" for exploiting the religious enthusiasm of young men for illegitimate purposes. The Grand Mufti also strongly warned wealthy Saudis to avoid funding causes that "harm Muslims." These are just some examples of concrete opposition to al-Qaida emerging around the world.
- It is significant that there is notable and consistent opposition in Arab country polling to the targeting of civilians and use of terrorism. As David Pollock recently noted in one of this Institute's sessions, "Since 2004, the most striking new trend in regional opinion is the steady surge toward greater popular opposition to any attacks on American civilians anywhere among all Arab publics polled on such questions by different pollsters, many times over." This trend is reflected in popular culture. For example, popular musicians in Pakistan and Indonesia are performing anti-terrorism songs that have become anthems for Muslims who want to distance themselves from extremism and violence. The tactics and methods of al-Qaida are more and more being rejected.

We know that all of this matters to al-Qaida and that its senior leadership is sensitive to the perceived legitimacy of both their actions and their ideology. They care about their image because it has real world effects on recruitment, donations, and support in Muslim and religious communities for the al-Qaida message.

In his recent Question and Answer session, Zawahiri had to address the question of the legitimacy of targeting civilians. Interestingly, he sidestepped the question in part by claiming al-Qaida does not target civilians and arguing that loss of innocent Muslim life was either accidental or the Muslims mixing with non-Muslims were fair game. That is a hard argument to sell among the Muslim victims of al-Qaida terrorism in Baghdad, Riyadh, Casablanca, Amman, Algiers, and Istanbul. In fact, victims of al-Qaida terrorism are beginning to organize and are exposing the human toll of al-Qaida's tactics.

These challenges from within Muslim communities and even extremist circles will be insurmountable at the end of the day for al-Qaida for two fundamental reasons. Its baseline ideology to which its members are committed is violently exclusionary and the terrorist tactics with greatest potential strategic benefit to al-Qaida are precisely the ones that are most rejected and unpopular, including among Muslims.

Combined with the tactical and strategic "soft" and "hard" pressure placed on this movement by the international community, I believe that it is the moral pressure gaining momentum across the globe that will ultimately help dismantle al-Qaida. al-Qaida's downfall and the end of the broader movement that it represents will follow inherently from their dark vision and terrorist tactics.

## Persistent Challenges

**T**his is not to say that the WOT is won or that we will not need to endure setbacks. Indeed, there are some critical challenges that we are attempting to address but that will require long term commitments and attention from the U.S. government.

Senior al-Qaida leadership and trainees have found safe haven in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border area, in particular in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. This safe haven allows al-Qaida to plot and train and

provides a physical environment in which like-minded terrorist groups and operatives can mingle and create alliances of convenience. This is a direct threat to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the rest of the world, given the planning and training occurring there every day.

We are engaged now with the new government in Islamabad to ensure they understand the criticality of this issue for us, and our commitment to working closely with them to ensure that the FATA does not remain in the long term an international terrorist safe haven. This is a complicated issue and part of the world, in which tribal dynamics dominate and in which the writ of the Pakistani central government does not extend. Our efforts with the Pakistanis include training and equipping their local, indigenous forces (the Frontier Corps) and the military, as well as providing development aid and economic assistance targeted to areas in need. This is part of an evolving, comprehensive strategy that will take time to succeed.

Indeed, the problem of the FATA safe haven will not be solved overnight, but it is clear that this is not just a Pakistani or American problem. It is one that affects the entire world and must involve key countries to help find solutions. For example, the British have pointed to numerous plots in the United Kingdom with direct links back to AQ in Pakistan. Coalition forces in Afghanistan and NATO countries have a direct interest in what happens in the FATA. We are addressing the need to internationalize the approach in for a like the G8, in which the Leaders have committed to working jointly with Pakistan to develop the FATA through economic assistance and investment.

In addition, the al-Qaida movement benefits from the seeming acceptance of a broader narrative that the "West" is at war with Islam, regardless of the reality that al-Qaida has led the slaughter of thousands of Muslim innocents around the world. al-Qaida has artfully woven itself into the fabric of this narrative. We have difficulty breaking through this impression -- regardless of the goodwill or efforts by the U.S. government and American citizens to help Muslims and non-Muslims alike as in the Pakistan earthquake, the South Asian tsunami, or even in the Balkans, and in Afghanistan. The cartoon incidents or isolated events and comments are often used by al-Qaida and their adherents to foment a greater sense of assault on the part of the West and values associated with broader globalization.

Part of the challenge is shifting this paradigm, so that the myth of such a conflict is debunked. Part of this is explaining that Muslims are a part of the "West" and breaking the notion of a clash of cultures. Even if we cannot affect this broad narrative quickly, we must ensure that al-Qaida is not portrayed as the defender or vanguard for Muslims. al-Qaida and its ideology need to be divorced from this broader narrative and defined clearly as enemies of humanity who thrive on the misery and chaos they perpetuate, especially among Muslims. They should be revealed as themselves being at war with Muslims, especially those who do not believe as they do or subscribe to the al-Qaida agenda.

Much of this will require credible voices, outside of the U.S. government, to confront this false narrative. We are starting to see glimmers of precisely this, with some Muslims in Europe starting to reclaim what it means to be a faithful Muslim living in the "West". In response to the recent Geert Wilder's film "FITNA", Dutch Muslims launched a viral "Hug Wilders" campaign instead of reacting violently to the film. This is the type of action -- if replicated in various communities and in different ways -- that will help reframe the narrative and isolate violent extremists.

The international community is further hampered by a lack of consensus on what type of legal model and rules should apply to address the 21st century terrorist threat represented by al-Qaida. What standards of proof, evidence, procedures, and sentences should apply against those who are trained or associated members of this loosely-tied global terrorist movement intent on possibly using apocalyptic means to achieve their long-term strategic goals?

Clearly, this is not a classic criminal problem for which traditional criminal rules should apply, and the multiple theaters in which these terrorists operate, make it difficult to apply any one standard or procedures. This legal and policy debate is starting to emerge in earnest in Europe, where the fixation to date has been on the U.S. attempts to

fashion a legal construct and solution to address this problem. The international community -- especially jurists and academics -- need to engage in good faith to develop realistic options for a robust legal paradigm that allows for the protection of our national and collective security while respecting the rights of suspected individuals.

Finally, Iran and Syria's state sponsorship of terrorism presents immediate challenges to our counter-terrorism policies and national security. We know that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force supports terrorism around the world -- and has done so historically in Lebanon and in attacks such as the bombing of the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) in Buenos Aires in 1994. This assistance is not restricted to Hizballah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups. We know that the Qods Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan, as well as to Iraqi Shi'a who target and kill Coalition and Iraqi forces.

With Syria, we know that it continues to be a center for terrorist activity, including serving as the primary pipeline for foreign suicide bombers into Iraq through the Damascus Airport. These suicide bombers represent a strategically important threat to Iraq's stability and the safety of Iraqi civilians and our soldiers. We need to continue to pressure and expose the ongoing state sponsorship of these two regimes, which have an interest in not only opposing U.S. interests but in sowing instability wherever they see an advantage for their interests.

Such state sponsorship is dangerous because these countries provide weapons, training, financing, and logistical support to unaccountable terrorist actors. Such sponsorship also provides some legitimacy to those still wedded to the dying orthodoxy that terrorist acts can be justified.

## Conclusion

**W**e are attempting to address all of these challenges with the varied tools at our command and by innovating new areas in our counterterrorism approach. We know the War on Terror -- with its embedded struggle against a violent extremist ideology -- is a generational calling that requires the entire U.S. government and the international community to act. There will be challenges and setbacks, but there is no doubt in my mind that we will see victory in this struggle, with markers and key indicators of that success emerging even today. There is also no doubt that we will see al-Qaida defeated, imploding from its own moral hypocrisy and strategic missteps. That said, we must remain focused and committed to ensuring the safety and security of this country against an enemy that remains committed to the destruction of our way of life. That has been the work of this administration, and it will no doubt be the work of administrations to come. ❖

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