

Re-Enlist U.N. in War on Terror

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Articles & Testimony

The recent National Intelligence Estimate painted a troubling picture. While al-Qaida is resurgent, with an "undiminished" intent to attack the U.S. homeland, international counterterrorism cooperation is likely to wane as 9/11 grows more distant. Revitalizing the United Nations' counterterrorism role would be an important step to bolster the international effort against al-Qaida.

The United Nations has demonstrated that it can play a significant counterterrorism role. Indeed, for the first few years after 9/11, it was at the center of the fight against terrorism. In fact, the United Nations first took on al-Qaida and the Taliban before 9/11, passing Resolution 1267 in 1999 to pressure the Taliban to evict al-Qaida from Afghanistan.

That effort failed, but the United Nations' declaration of al-Qaida as a terrorist entity was an important step forward - particularly given the traditionally paralyzing U.N. debates about who is a terrorist and who is a "freedom fighter." The fact that al-Qaida and the Taliban were blacklisted certainly helped the United States build international support quickly after 9/11.

By late 2003, almost 300 al-Qaida and Taliban members and entities were on the United Nations' "1267 list." All U.N. members were required to freeze the financial assets and restrict the travel and arms trade of those on the list.

The United Nations put a team in place to monitor compliance. This monitoring group, made up of terrorist-financing experts operating with considerable autonomy, released detailed reports outlining where countries were falling short. For example, in 2003, the group criticized Italy, Switzerland and Liechtenstein for allowing designated individuals to run large-scale businesses in their countries. This type of "naming and shaming" -- used frequently by the group -- was often an effective tool in pressuring countries to act.

The United Nations also passed Resolution 1373 in late September 2001, creating a Counterterrorism Committee and calling on all countries to improve their capabilities to combat terrorist financing. The international community heeded the call; by early 2004, 117 countries had ratified the Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. Many countries -- including the members of the European Union -- also passed legislation criminalizing terrorist financing and developed systems to freeze terrorists' assets.

The Counterterrorism Committee also provided technical assistance to countries having difficulty making the necessary improvements. By early 2002, the United States had provided 48 countries with training, and the United Kingdom had offered legislative drafting assistance to 46.

By early 2004, however, the United Nations' role in combating terrorist financing began diminishing. That January, the United Nations fired the monitoring group after some member states complained that its reports were too critical. The group was replaced by a team with far less autonomy. The new team, which operated under the close supervision of the United Nations, was required to consult with member states before mentioning them in reports, and to reveal sources of information. As a result, according to a former member of the original group, "there is not one line" in the new team's reports "that could be construed as a specific criticism directed at any country." The

number of names added to the United Nations' 1267 list also began dropping, with only 26 new entities designated in 2004.

The Counterterrorism Committee also lost its momentum by that point. Countries tired of the reporting requirements and began to ignore the United Nations' calls for further improvements.

The United Nations made several failed attempts to re-energize the committee. In March 2004, for example, the Security Council passed Resolution 1535 -- explicitly acknowledging the need for a "revitalized" Counterterrorism Committee -- creating a counterterrorism executive directorate to assist the committee. Unfortunately, the directorate made little progress moving the United Nations forward.

Several steps should be taken to bolster the United Nations' role.

First, the organization should re-establish an independent monitoring group not under the thumb of the Security Council. The group should have wide-ranging authority to conduct its work and the freedom to criticize countries as it sees fit -- including the United States and the other members of the Security Council.

Second, the United Nations must be more strategic -- utilizing different approaches for different problems. Some countries have the political will to improve but lack the technical or financial capabilities; others have no desire to tackle these issues.

For the former, the Counterterrorism Committee should continue to provide assistance and support. For the latter, however, the United Nations must be more aggressive in pushing them forward -- including publicizing their shortcomings.

International cooperation is critical to the fight against al-Qaida. A U.S.-led effort to build international support would encounter serious obstacles, because countries are often reluctant to succumb to U.S. pressure. A U.N.-led effort would not carry the same stigma.

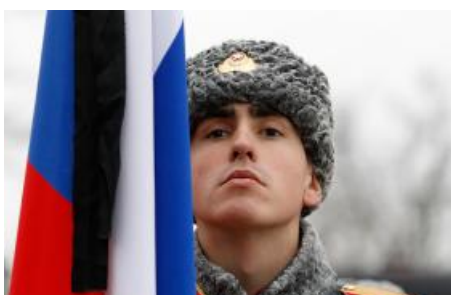
Ultimately, a stronger United Nations would benefit America's counterterrorism efforts. As a former U.N. monitoring group member noted, the United States was the greatest beneficiary of the original group "because it gave them a lever to name and shame."

Given the limits of what the United States can accomplish on its own against al-Qaida -- and its status as al-Qaida's top target -- pushing to restore the United Nations' role should be a priority for U.S. policymakers.

Michael Jacobson, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, served as a senior adviser in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and as counsel on the 9/11 commission. ❖

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