

Implications of the 9-11 Report: Recommendations for U.S. Middle East Policy

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Brief Analysis

Of the 9-11 Commission's forty-one principal recommendations, only one relates directly to the application of military power: namely, the need to eliminate existing terrorist sanctuaries and to prevent the emergence of future safe havens. Indeed, military action is only one of many elements of national policy needed to address the ongoing threat of Islamist terrorism. A comprehensive, composite strategy is necessary, one that uses all aspects of national power and deals with the full spectrum of issues, from aviation security to public diplomacy.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, the commission found that there was no knowledge or financing of the September 11 plot at the governmental level. Yet, a number of Saudi charities and individual citizens did contribute to the finances of al-Qaeda. Future U.S. administrations need to expand the basis of U.S.-Saudi relations, moving beyond the exclusive formula of providing physical security in exchange for oil security. Efforts toward political and economic reform need to be recognized as being in Saudi Arabia's own national interest.

C. MICHAEL HURLEY

Among other key issues, the 9-11 Commission emphasized the imperative of identifying current and future terrorist safe havens. Three countries stand out in any such discussion:

Pakistan: Numerous factors make Pakistan a country of particular concern: poverty, political instability, high levels of illiteracy, numerous madrasas, extremely limited government control over remote regions, and a large population that is viewed as being ripe for exploitation by extremists. All of this comes on top of the presence of nuclear armaments, simmering hostility with India, the Pakistani intelligence service's former close ties with the Taliban, and the precarious position of the current regime. President Pervez Musharraf made a strategic decision to aid the United States following September 11. He strengthened this commitment following a number of attempts on his life. Pakistani troops are now actively combating al-Qaeda and Taliban elements in the country's border regions. The 9-11 Commission recommended that the United States commit to helping Pakistan in the long term. Both military and educational aid should be provided as long as Pakistan continues to make progress and address the challenges that it faces.

Afghanistan: The United States currently has more than 10,000 troops in Afghanistan, but elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda are nevertheless attempting to regroup. The commission called for a long-term commitment to a secure and stable Afghanistan, which would, by extension, give the government an opportunity to improve the lives of the Afghan people. The country must not be permitted to revert to a sanctuary for crime and terrorism.

Accordingly, the commission called for an increased NATO role there, primarily in helping to build a national army.

Yemen: Yemen's weak central government makes it a potential sanctuary; there are vast areas beyond government control. The United States must put forth a strong counterterrorism effort there, including a focus on tribal chiefs, who may protect radicals. At same time, Yemenis should identify America with the building of institutions. Stronger, more effective government would foster greater cooperation from local leaders, which would help bring local allies

into the counterterrorism effort.

THOMAS DOWLING

Al-Qaeda has proven itself to be effective at carrying out mass murder around the world. Yet, its actions thus far pale in comparison to some of the plans envisaged by its leaders (e.g., chemical and radiological attacks). Osama bin Laden has long been the CEO of al-Qaeda. He has either made or endorsed all of the group's key decisions, and there is no doubt of his direct, executive responsibility for the September 11 attacks.

The current struggle has at times been portrayed as a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West. This characterization is false, because bin Laden does not represent the Islamic world. He is a political fanatic bent on using violence to reshape the world into his image of perfection. His ideas, which revel in the glory of the struggle itself, focus even less on the future than other problematic ideologies of the past. The traditional Islamist view is that the removal of the U.S. and Western presence from the Islamic world will lead to the collapse of regional regimes and usher in radical political change. For al-Qaeda, this view has evolved into a quest for the destruction of the United States itself. Of particular concern is the fact that those who ascribe to this ideology see themselves not as following the views of a person, but as agents of God's will.

As a self-proclaimed champion of Islam, bin Laden has tried to convince people to support and sacrifice for his vision by selectively invoking Islamic scripture and history. These strands are woven together with simplistic, often incorrect versions of historical events and manipulative appeals to the real, deeply held grievances of the Islamic world. By turning legitimate grievances into hatred, bin Laden seeks to justify the destruction of anyone and anything that is deemed unworthy or unacceptable. While these ideas have been around for a number of decades, it is only recently that they have gained support beyond the radical fringes. Causal factors for this growth have been the failure of secular Arab nationalism and the continuing relevance of the Iranian revolution and the Afghan struggle against the Soviets.

The imperative is not to minimize the legitimate grievances of the Muslim world. The Muslim world is the core of the struggle, since bin Laden seeks to shape its future first. Accordingly, the United States and its allies should seek to bring competing ideas about the future of Muslim society into public debate. Ideally, these ideas could be debated freely, absent the constraints of al-Qaeda's brand of rejectionism. The grievances most in need of attention relate to Iraq, the Palestinians, and the general sense of stagnation throughout the region.

The Muslim world needs to consider the price of bin Laden's ideology. With this should come the realization that the enemy of a better future is not the United States or the West, but the ideology of groups like al-Qaeda, which has no interest in creativity, development, open debate, or innovation. The 9-11 Commission recommended measures that would increase the West's understanding of the Muslim world. It also noted the need for the Arab and Muslim worlds to open themselves to the study of other cultures and people. The U.S. government needs to consider the implications of local reforms and the sort of societies that it would like to see evolve. Although other aspects of the struggle against Islamist terrorism are well underway, the war to destroy bin Laden's ideology is just beginning.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Yonatan Levy, a research intern at The Washington Institute.

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