

Target All Terror

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

May 8, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

The threat of devastating terrorist attacks targeting Americans still is very real despite the near-hysterical, though unsubstantiated, warnings of al-Qaida's plans to strike at everything from banks to grocery stores.

Based on intelligence found in Afghanistan, 15 people were arrested in Singapore for planning to bomb the U.S. Embassy, American business interests, and buses shuttling U.S. servicemen. The U.S. Embassy in Yemen was recently the target of an al-Qaida bombing plot. Terror suspects plotting attacks have recently been arrested in Germany, Spain, Bosnia and England.

Richard Reid came alarmingly close to blowing up an airliner on the way to the United States. In his State of the Union address, President Bush warned that thousands of terrorists are "spread throughout the world like ticking bombs."

While the objective of eradicating the Taliban and al-Qaida and securing a stable transition to peace in Afghanistan is clear, the goals of the broader war on terrorism, beyond those two organizations, remain ill-defined.

There are still those who have difficulty defining who is a terrorist beyond al-Qaida. Washington policymakers for some time have been discussing phase two of the war -- that is, eliminating the real and immediate Iraqi threat to the United States and its allies. But the parameters and tactics of phase 1 1/2 -- dealing with the rest of the terrorist groups -- are still being debated.

It is vital that the international community define the war on terrorism. But not in terms of specific terrorist groups, ethnicities, religions or regions. Rather, it should be defined as a war against terrorism for any reason -- as a means of expression, rebellion, resistance or to further a political, social, national or any other goal.

President Bush made a groundbreaking statement in November when he said that no grievance, however legitimate, sanctions terrorist attacks against civilians.

"In this world, there are good causes and bad causes, and we may disagree on where that line is drawn," he said. "Yet there is no such thing as a good terrorist. No national aspiration, no remembered wrong can ever justify the deliberate murder of the innocent. Any government that rejects this principle, trying to pick and choose its terrorist friends, will know the consequences."

International terrorism knows no boundaries, and terrorist groups of global reach are intimately interconnected, so much so that their common agendas bridge even traditional divisions such as those between Shiite and Sunni extremists. Iran and its terrorist proxy groups, particularly Hezbollah, are connected not only to Palestinian terrorist groups but also to groups associated with al-Qaida, like Asbat al-Ansar, and, according to an increasing number of reports, directly to al-Qaida elements as well.

The need to live up to the grand statements about this being a war on terrorism writ large is critical. History shows that an even greater risk to the global community will emerge if world leaders fail to live up to their pledges to fight terrorism. Such a failure will doom future pleas to end terror to be nothing more than diplomatic background noise.

More ominously, how long will it take for the acceptance of suicide bombing as a legitimate form of expression or resistance -- even for a cause as legitimate as the establishment of a Palestinian state -- to make its way from the Middle East to other corners of the world? How long before frustrated groups with stagnating causes blow up buses in Europe or North America?

Terrorism will always exist, which is why there is no exit strategy to fighting it. Counterterrorism is a form of conflict management, not conflict resolution. To bear any fruit, counterterrorism techniques must be used as comprehensively, consistently and cooperatively as possible.

The war on terrorism will only succeed in dismantling terrorist groups' operational, logistical and financial networks -- and, by extension, preventing terrorist attacks -- if the governments and agencies involved act in concert and if they fight on all its fronts, in all its iterations.

Any terrorism we fail to address today will come back to haunt us tomorrow. There can be no acceptable terrorism. ❖

Baltimore Sun

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

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