

# Next Steps in the War on Terrorism

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### Brief Analysis

On March 1, 2002, Matthew Levitt, Dennis Ross, and Patrick Clawson addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Levitt is a senior fellow in terrorism studies at the Institute and a former terrorism analyst for the FBI. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1486\)](#) of Ambassador Ross and Dr. Clawson's remarks.

Six months after the September 2001 attacks, U.S. focus remains fixed on taking the war to the terrorists. There are a variety of roles along a spectrum of cooperation to be played by countries throughout the world, from military operations to freezing terrorists' assets and sharing intelligence.

### Military Assistance

The United States is considering providing assistance to several countries in the greater Middle East in which international terrorists are active. In Georgia, some 1,500 Chechen guerrillas and dozens of Arab and Afghan fighters are reportedly hiding among as many as 8,000 Russian Chechen refugees in the area of the Pankisi Gorge -- a rugged and lawless area bordering Chechnya, referred to as a virtual no-go area for Georgian authorities. It is also known as a smuggling route for drug and weapons traffickers. The Bush administration is proposing to provide basic equipment, technical advice, and training, and plans to sell Georgia ten unarmed transport helicopters. Georgia would like heavy weaponry such as tanks and artillery, but there is concern that it would use such weapons to crush ethnic unrest in its Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions. Yet, it remains unclear whether limited assistance would enable Georgia to assert control over the Pankisi Gorge or other lawless areas.

So far, the only other case of possible military assistance to have received significant public attention is that of Yemen. U.S. officials acknowledged that investigations have uncovered links between the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole and the September 11 suicide hijackings. While the Yemeni government was highly uncooperative in the original investigation of the Cole bombing, it has sought to ally itself with the United States since the September attacks. A couple of al-Qaeda terrorists from a list of thirty-nine people wanted by the United States have been arrested; the trial of suspects in the Cole bombing has been postponed so that FBI investigators can finish reviewing the material and interview the suspects themselves. Yemeni government forces have attacked tribal leaders who refused to hand over al-Qaeda suspects; hundreds of foreign students studying in Yemen have been deported; and a senior al-Qaeda terrorist blew himself up while being pursued by security officials.

The United States is preparing to send several hundred troops to train, arm, and assist the Yemenis in their efforts -- whether this initiative will gain popular support in Yemen is unclear. Furthermore, the security environment in the country is very problematic. The Yemeni government appears to be most interested in using whatever advanced weaponry the United States provides to crack down on traditional tribal opponents, while blaming them for harboring al-Qaeda terrorists. Moreover, the Yemeni president's son -- who many believe is being groomed for a Syria-style succession -- is the head of the Yemeni Special Forces, which would benefit from this American training and arms. All of these facts raise the possibilities of a blowback either in the event of a collapse of the regime, or, given the connections between many extremists and government officials, the weapons winding up in the hands of the extremists that the United States wants to suppress.

### Other Hotspots

There are several other hotspots, notably Southeast Asia. Al-Qaeda elements penetrated the region long ago and established a terrorist network that dwarfs the one coming to light in Europe. In the Middle East, Lebanon presents a growing concern. Al-Qaeda terrorists are reported to be taking advantage of the weak central rule, nests of terrorism like the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, and the willing assistance of sympathetic groups like the Asbat al-Ansar group. To date the United States has satisfied itself with vicariously covering the issue of Lebanese sponsorship of terrorism under Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. However, this arrangement should be reassessed; after all, one of the September 11 hijackers was Lebanese, and Hizballah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp are more active than ever in Lebanon. Hopefully, the upcoming edition of *Patterns of Global Terrorism* (due in late April) will reflect such a change.

Another likely outlet for Islamic extremists on the run -- albeit on a smaller scale -- is the Kurdish area of northern Iraq, where a number of small, local, radical Islamic groups exist. The area's location, terrain, and lack of central rule make it an attractive place to hide. There are no easy military options here either, but the United States is likely to continue using its diplomatic relationships with the Kurdish parties to press for their cooperation.

Nevertheless, the next frontier to be addressed in the war on terrorism should still be the newly independent states of Central Asia, with a special focus on the Fergana Valley that straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The valley is the home turf of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan -- a terrorist group closely affiliated with al-Qaeda -- as well as a host of other radical Islamic groups and movements. The region's close proximity to Afghanistan, its cultural and historical ties to that country, its vast terrain, and its weak central governments all make it a leading candidate for infiltration by al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives.

### Terrorist Financing

Alongside the importance of finding fugitive terrorists and assessing military options, tackling terrorist financing and sharing intelligence are paramount. Especially relevant in this case are Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi officials are keen to stress their cooperation with the United States in the war on terrorism, and their cooperation on the law-enforcement and intelligence fronts is reportedly rather strong. Terrorist financing remains a very sensitive issue, however. At minimum, the Saudis have long exhibited a pattern of looking the other way when funds are used for extremist purposes.

As a major financial center, the UAE -- Sharjah and Dubai in particular -- is also a major concern to U.S. officials: the untraceable hawala money-transfer operators, the gold market, drug smuggling, and unregulated air cargo traffic from the Emirates to Afghanistan and beyond.

In both the Saudi and UAE cases, the United States must express its willingness to work discreetly with their respective officials to address these issues, while at the same time firmly indicating that the events of September 11 have lowered the threshold of tolerance -- that behavior which may have been acceptable last August is no longer

acceptable today.

Finally, intelligence is assuming an increasingly important role in the war on terrorism. Intelligence has guided the war in Afghanistan; it also guides direct military action, counterterrorism training missions, the crackdown on international terrorist financing, and law-enforcement operations around the world. Tremendous amounts of information have been discovered in Afghanistan, in the interrogations of captured al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters, from continued investigations into the September 11 attacks, and from the logistical support cells uncovered in Europe and elsewhere. Continued and enhanced intelligence sharing will be a primary topic of conversation between U.S. officials and foreign leaders, especially in the Middle East.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Natan Sachs.

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