

Terror against America: Assessment and Implications (Part II)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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Fighting Terror As a National Priority

Today our nation faces a defining moment. Terror is no longer someone else's threat; it is now our threat. If the Soviet threat shaped our priorities throughout the Cold War, fighting terror will now provide a similar focus for our foreign and national security policy. A new mindset is required. Until now, the United States has sought to counter terror. Now, America is declaring war on it -- that cannot be just a slogan. While a sustained campaign will be necessary, it is important to move quickly to develop new rules of the game. Before the world's collective consciousness about the shock and horror of last week's attacks recedes, it is essential to legitimize these new ground rules for combating terror and those who support it directly or indirectly.

Building Coalitions

The Bush administration is wisely moving to forge an international coalition against terror. Fighting terror is a collective responsibility and a collective need. Working collectively is essential in the intelligence and law enforcement areas. A wide coalition of support can spur action to shrink potential havens for terrorists and also legitimize the use of military power against terrorist leaders, groups, and the states that support them. But the inherent tensions between having wide coalitions and pursuing a systematic campaign against all those who are supporting and facilitating terror must be kept in mind. Against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, there will be no

shortage of support. What if the trail of evidence leads to a different state sponsor of the attack on America? What if it leads to the Iraqis, or even the Iranians? Will it be as easy to forge a wide coalition in that case? Would such a coalition try to constrain our actions? While building a coalition, the administration must recognize that one coalition will not fit all threat sizes. Wider collective or cooperative responses in some areas and against some threats will be feasible. Smaller coalitions based on countries sharing America's core values and concerns will be necessary in the more difficult cases like Iran. The administration may desire larger coalitions in the tougher cases, but it is unlikely to produce them unless it succeeds in convincing the rest of the world that there is a new ball game with new rules.

An Intelligent Intelligence

Some will argue that the government must relax the restrictions it has imposed on itself; others will say intelligence agencies need more "operators," even potentially unsavory ones in the field. Each argument should be seriously assessed, but at one level, both miss the immediate point. As with the case of any strategic surprise, it is likely that U.S. intelligence had all the information it needed. The failure was most likely not a lack of indicators, but the misinterpretation of the indicators. The immediate task is to follow all the leads and not leap to a conclusion. Clearly, the enemy has engaged in deception and disinformation and may be continuing to do so now. It is important to look at the assumptions that led to a misreading of the indicators. And, the intelligence community would be wise not to fall victim to the old adage of fighting the last war. Just as the enemy is likely to change its tactics and targets now, so too must the intelligence agencies retool and adjust as well.

Delegitimizing Terror

In addition to the coalition-building efforts now underway, it is important that U.S. diplomacy also recognize the psychological dimension of the challenge. Terrorists and their supporters must be discredited. Many may say that international condemnations of the New York/Washington outrages already point to the discrediting of terror, but this actually misses the point. Not all terrorists come from the Middle East, but there is a pervading climate in the region that legitimizes acts of terror. Suicide bombing is accepted by many as a natural part of the "struggle" with Israel. Nearly every Friday sermon broadcast on Palestinian Authority television over the last year, for example, has glorified the "martyrs" of suicide bombings; calls for jihad against America -- not only Israel -- are commonplace. This phenomenon is not unique to Palestinians. One Egyptian journalist in a mainstream newspaper recently wrote of how he swelled with pride after seeing the recent suicide bombing in a Jerusalem pizza parlor, and he argued that America must be made to pay if anything is to change in the Middle East.

Condemnations of Tuesday's terror mean nothing if Arab leaders are not prepared to act now to end the legitimacy offered to terror and suicide bombings in their state media -- to put a stop to the climate of hate that is encouraged on state-run television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and mosque preaching. This is not to suggest that Palestinians specifically, or the Arabs generally, have to give up their cause or their grievances. On the contrary, the Palestinians have legitimate aspirations that need to be addressed. But it is unacceptable for suicide bombers to be lionized as "martyrs," with their pictures adorning Palestinian school walls. Arab leaders must now make clear to their people that peace is legitimate and terror is not; that suicide bombing -- whether against Americans, Israelis, or anyone else -- is a perversion of Islam, not its reflection; that terror does not promote Arab or Palestinian interests, but discredits them.

Working with our European and Asian allies, the effort to delegitimize the culture of hatred that undergirds terror should be a centerpiece of our collective diplomacy. This will not end terror, but it is an essential part of the psychological struggle that must be waged to undermine it. It should also be a necessary precursor to any U.S. reengagement in the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. If the Arab world wants American intervention, Arab leaders must do their part.

A Campaign, Not a Battle

In the military realm, there is no quick fix in the war on terror. Pulling old operational plans off the shelf will not suffice. It would be a mistake to simply think in terms of "over the horizon" strikes at particular facilities or to think in terms of "trophies," even if the trophy is Osama bin Laden. Removing bin Laden will mean little if the network he supports is untouched. Instead, it is necessary to think in terms of the command and control of his network -- to identify and target the critical supporting infrastructure that sustains these networks and allows them to plan, train, recruit, and finance their operations. At the same time, it is important to think about minimizing the civilian, noncombatant casualties of any military strikes to preserve the moral high ground. And, it is essential to think about how to preoccupy the terrorist organizations with their own security, making them less able to plan and carry out acts of terror.

In sum, only a comprehensive strategy will be effective against the terrorist organizations and the states that allow them to operate. This means choking off their finances; raising the costs for those who would provide even indirect support for terror; transforming the psychology that legitimizes terror; increasing economic assistance to some states so that governments, not radicals like Hizballah, are the source of social safety nets; and using military force to destroy capabilities and keep terror networks uncertain where they will be hit next. In this new world, the ground rules have changed and the administration must use all the tools at its disposal. Reliance on traditional thinking will ensure that the horror of September 11 will be neither the last nor the worst of the catastrophes America will face. ❖

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