

Wrong Targets in the War on Terror

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In Brief

U.S. counter-terror policy has focused too much on responding to known problems, such as existing terror networks and public attitudes, and not the totality of the threat.

The intelligence community is under pressure to acquire actionable intelligence, which may be coming at the cost of deeper analytical products

While we have learned a lot about terror networks since 9/11, there are still large gaps in our knowledge. Those gaps are significant because they explain some of the failures of our strategy. Our knowledge of the problem of Jihadism comes largely from two sources: statements of Jihadists themselves as well as investigations of their activities after they become public; and opinion polls that shed light on public attitudes within the Muslim world. These offer a terribly incomplete picture of the challenge. To the extent that our counter-terror strategy is shaped by only these elements we are destined to come up short.

While we have hardened some targets in this country, we have yet to diminish the threat to the United States. U.S. policy to-date has rested on two pillars. First, we have adopted a strategy of attrition toward committed Jihadists. We seek to capture or kill them wherever we find them. This is, however, a problematic approach. The basic challenge of any attrition strategy is ensuring that one is reducing the enemy's forces faster than they can be replaced. Given the relatively small number of actual Jihadists and the relatively large and growing number of potential recruits among the young and disenfranchised in the Muslim world, the numbers do not seem to favor an attrition approach. Worse, pursuing a strategy of attrition has required us to adopt such expedients as missile strikes in foreign countries, which often result in collateral damage as well as renditions and indefinite imprisonment that seem to anger much of the rest of the world, including the publics in close American allies.

Second, we have pursued a policy of "draining the swamp" and "transforming the Middle East." The logic of this pillar helped lead us into Iraq, which has turned into counter-productive policy from the standpoint of reducing the terror threat to the United States. More broadly, however, it is a policy with a very low probability of

success. If the “swamp” exists due to poverty, social rigidity, overpopulation, political oppression, and bad leaders, can the United States really hope to make a major difference?

In a fundamental sense, our counter-terror strategy abroad has been action-oriented rather than results-driven. We focus on attriting terror networks and social transformation because we have information about those problems. But if we think of the challenge holistically, it may be possible to develop alternative strategies that are both more effective and have fewer negative consequences.

The threat of Jihadist terror did not arise in a vacuum. It is linked to very specific sets of grievances and ideological beliefs. It is a process, not an outcome. At this point, there is still a great deal of work to do on understanding the threat from a systems perspective. Instead of making policy on the basis of what we know, or think we know, we ought to first identify specifically those things that we do not know and assess the implications of those gaps.

For instance, we have a sense of roughly the number of individuals in various countries who believe terrorism is justified. But we do not know how many of those individuals have actually provided even indirect support to terror groups. Of the ones who have provided some support, we know virtually nothing of their motivations. Are they providing safe havens out of sympathy or fear of retribution? Do they continue to contribute to compromised charities because they want to help funnel money to radical groups or despite the fact that some of the money will be diverted to Jihadist causes?

Our so-called “war on terror” continues to be based on incomplete information, and the analytic community remains divided on very basic issues about the threat – such as the relative weight of the different potential causes of the problem. There is a great pressure to be seen as doing something, but spending the time to ask the right questions and to identify the knowable unknowns as well as the unknowable unknowns – in the memorable terminology of former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld – *is* doing something.

The pressure to act encourages the development of actionable intelligence, which is too often narrowly defined as target data. Certainly our intelligence community must be searching for this sort of data, but we also need to do more work on broader analytical products. We need more culture-specific knowledge not just because it may yield a terrorist cell to disrupt but because it will give us a deeper understanding of the threat. Until we understand the system that sustains terror networks, we can have no confidence that our anti-terror policies are moving us forward rather than back.

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