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Deterring Al Qaeda after Iraq: A Critique of Paul Davis' RAND Study

by Daniel R. DePetris

Today marks the last day of Operation Iraqi Freedom. So what? To what end? Ever since the successful conclusion of the Cold War, U.S. academics and policymakers have frequently championed deterrence as a military concept. This, of course, is not without substance. Through a combination of nuclear weapons, large bases overseas, and the potential for quick military action, Washington was able to change the Soviet Union's behavior from a force who aggressively tried to expand communist ideology in the 1960's to a reserved and degraded confederation by the time of its collapse.

Deterrence is not just about the past, however. Today, the White House uses deterrence throughout its foreign policy, both to keep adversaries in check and to prevent violence from spiraling out of control once conflict is initiated. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, deterrence worked on Iraq quite significantly until the collapse of his regime twelve years later. The threat of mutually assured destruction continues to prevent the North Koreans (however "crazy") from invading its southern neighbor, lest the US military be drawn into the fighting. The most contemporary example of deterrence at work is the containment of the Iranians, who have become isolated in terms of the international community and boxed-in by U.S. forces along its southern coast (via U.S. naval vessels) and its western border (U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan).

Paul Davis- a researcher at the RAND Corp. - is now taking the concept further than it has ever gone before. In a recent study that was just published by the RAND Corp's National Defense Research Institute, Davis tries to assess whether old-fashioned deterrence theory can work on one of America's most dangerous contemporary foes: Al'Qaeda (AQ). Is it possible for the United States to deter AQ from launching large-scale attacks on American targets? And if so, can deterrence apply to other terrorist groups as well, say the Pakistani Taliban or Lashkar e-Taiba in South Asia?

To traditionalists, this study may seem incompatible with the underlying principles of deterrence theory. Al'Qaeda is no ordinary organization. Unlike the leaders of a state, the leadership of Al'Qaeda does not necessarily exhibit qualities or characteristics that one would label as rational. In contrast to a government that is akin to putting ideology secondary to the national interest, the organizational core of AQ (as espoused by Osama bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri) is dictated by an extremely nihilistic version of Sunni Islam, otherwise known as violent Salafism. Its management is unforgiving, as demonstrated by the organization's violent campaigns against civilians associated with Jewish or Christian thought. And as Iraqis can testify, AQ is more than willing to launch devastating attacks against Muslims who either follow a different strain of Islam or who support a civilian government. How can the US possibly deter an enemy who operates without boundaries and without concern for human life?

Paul Davis doesn't claim to have the answer, but he does seem to suggest that the US can at least limit AQ's attacks by pursuing a two-fold strategy: beefing up defense measures at home and putting relentless pressure on terrorist targets abroad.

At first glance, the strategy sounds like it has promise. Through a sustained counterterrorism campaign emphasizing national defense- such as the intercepting of hostile communication or the disruption of attacks before they are executed- AQ fighters may gradually lose their motivation, thereby jeopardizing their credibility with sponsors and financiers. Likewise, bombing critical terrorist infrastructure would send a strong message to terrorists that no violent operation will go unnoticed or unpunished. Of course, military operations and other forms of offensive counterterrorism can also put a heavy dent in the operational capacity of a violent movement.

But it's hard to distinguish Davis' deterrence strategy with the strategy that the United States is already following today. In Pakistan's tribal regions, unmanned but lethal drones consistently target high-level terrorist operatives, yet decapitation of AQ commanders doesn't appear to curtail or influence Al'Qaeda's ideology in any significant way. American Special Forces are teaming up with Yemeni troops to find, route, and kill jihadists on the Peninsula, but the same jihadists were only one fuse away from downing a transatlantic passenger plane over Detroit. Al'Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi were killed in an airstrike last April, yet AQI continues to target Iraqi government ministries and Iraqi security forces with deadly effect (like last week's attack that killed over 50 Iraqis).

Al'Qaeda is an ideologically charged enemy. In many ways, the entire organization is as inward and intolerant as the violent ideology it preaches. Davis supports the notion that persistent failure by AQ could slowly unravel the group's support base, but contemporary history points in the exact opposite direction.

Faisal Shahzad's homemade car bomb in Times Square may have failed to explode in the middle of a busy New York day, but the mere attempt had the affect of boosting chatter on jihadist web forums and rallying the ranks of the jihadist community- albeit temporarily. Just the fact that Shahzad assembled explosive material in the middle of New York City was a cause for celebration among radical Islamist groups, for it graphically portrayed the lapses in American security and provoked constant media coverage weeks after the attempt.

The case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab is quite similar. While his incompetence with explosives was an embarrassment for Abdulmutallab personally, his effort still generated an enormous amount of American panic and non-stop media coverage, which served the jihadist narrative. Bin-Laden even praised the attempt; "If our messages had been able to reach you through words, we wouldn't have been delivering them through planes."

In short, tactical failures are still interpreted by jihadists as strategic successes. Even the slightest television or print coverage provides the jihadist community with the attention it so desperately desires for its cause.

Davis' research- while extremely thorough and intellectual- also misconstrues the reasons why terrorism continues to flourish despite coalition successes against terrorist networks over the past few years. Offensive military operations by the Pakistani Military, coupled with Pakistani disapproval of Al'Qaeda and the Taliban, still has not deterred these organizations from pursuing their deadly work. Support for terrorism inside Pakistan may be at a low point, numerous

militant groups are still engaging in sectarian attacks, regardless of popular discontent. Muhammad Amir Rana- director of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)- attempts to explain this phenomenon through an analysis of contemporary Pakistan.

While the entire analysis is worth reading, one quote in particular strikes at the heart of Davis' deterrence theory: "despite the low support for Al'Qaeda and the Taliban in the country, Pakistan continues to be faced with an unprecedented and devastating wave of terrorism." Why is this so? According to Rana, it's because "a society may be against violence, but not necessarily against the agenda of extremists." This is a point that cannot be underscored, for Davis' deterrence model fails to address the social and political grievances that are often catalysts for militant recruitment. Simply hoping that a failed terrorist bombing will discredit terrorism in the eyes of the local population is not good enough. Terrorism discourse will only decrease significantly if its causes- "injustice, inequality, identity crises...and a sense of marginalization" are tackled as priorities in US counterterrorism. As long as those numerous problems persist in a given society, terrorism and militancy will remain a problem.

None of this is to fault Davis' research. The fact that Davis was conducting an out-of-the-box project shows how dedicated he is to understanding the jihadist threat, mitigating the damage of terrorism, and discovering a new way to combat a resilient enemy.

But dedication still doesn't make up for questionable assumptions about how Al'Qaeda operates and what Al'Qaeda stands for as a violent global movement. The US and its allies can bomb all of the terrorist targets it wants, but social grievances will still provide AQ and other militant groups with a steady stream of recruits. Allied forces can continue to kill top and mid-level terrorist commanders, but other will surely take their place and work will go on unabated. The US can spend billions of dollars on improving domestic infrastructure, but it still won't put a dent in the enemy's compassion to strike again.

Therein lies the difficulties and frustrations of fighting an independent, asymmetric, and ideologically motivated enemy. Unlike a state that follows the rules of engagement and unlike a conventional army that has rational generals at the top, Al'Qaeda is not constrained by the "rules of the game." It's not a member of the nation-state community; its not bound by charters and treaties; and it has nothing to lose by trying. But perhaps more to the point, Al'Qaeda is a 21st century enemy that cannot be constrained by a doctrine that was originally designed for a conventional enemy in the 20th century.

The best the United States can do is to contain the jihadist threat through all uses of national power, which is precisely what the US has been doing to this day. Unilateral military activities and joint operations with indigenous forces are a must. Intelligence coordination with vital allies in troubled spots can have enormous dividends for the safety and security of the American homeland. In the longer term, improving US credibility throughout the Muslim world and countering Al'Qaeda's narrative- however difficult- may be able to push the terrorist mindset further into the fringes.

Ironically, Davis' recommends all of these practices. What is questionable is his presumption that a stream of failed terrorist attacks will slowly weaken Al'Qaeda's resolve. The United States will not defeat Al'Qaeda like it did the Soviet Union, but it can mitigate the impact of terrorism to a level that is tolerable to most Americans.

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