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Nine Years After 9/11: Assessing the War on Terror

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It has been nine years since terrorists struck the United States in New York, Pennsylvania, and at the Pentagon, killing nearly 3,000 Americans. Few Americans, especially those of us who were in the Pentagon or near the World Trade Center that day will ever forget it. A modern day Pearl Harbor, 9/11 was a day that radically changed our national security strategy. The smoke, fire, and casualties were stark reminders that the United States had failed to deal adequately with an emerging threat. Nine years of war have followed those attacks. The lives of the agents, police officers, and members of the Armed Forces who fight the war on terrorism --- as well as their families --- have been changed forever.

The costs of this war have been high. Over 5,600 American service members have been killed, and 1,050 of our Western allies have perished. Over 38,000 Americans have been wounded; countless stress and brain trauma injuries must also be added to that human toll. The number of Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani dead --- mostly at the hands of terrorists or insurgents --- dwarfs the Western total. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone have directly cost the US taxpayer over a trillion dollars.

This anniversary is an appropriate time to think about where we have been and where we need to be headed in this epic struggle to accomplish the U.S. goal to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda and its allies." Much good work has been done, but the nature of the war on terrorism --- the common euphemism for the war against Islamist extremism in its many varieties --- is changing, and the United States needs to chart a new course for the future. It will help any assessment to divide the war on terrorism into four interdependent campaigns: the worldwide campaign, the one on the home front, and the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Worldwide Campaign

The results of the worldwide war against AQ-inspired terrorism are a mixed, but mainly positive set of accomplishments. On the one hand, the late 2001 campaign in Afghanistan destroyed the first state of Usama Bin Laden's "caliphate" and chased him and his deputy, Ayman al- Zawahiri into hiding, presumably in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Hundreds of other senior Al Qaeda (AQ) officials have been killed or taken into custody. The violent death of AQ's number three official has taken place so often that it has become a familiar bit of black humor on TV talk shows. Western intelligence has done well in drying up its sources of financing. Al Qaeda has even had

to borrow money from its affiliates. Elsewhere, skilled actions by small elements of U.S. special operations forces have set back radicals in the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Al Qaeda (AQ) has devolved from a large, centralized organization that had its own country to a smaller organization that inspires, trains, and sometimes supports regional franchises that include among others: al-Shabbab in Somalia, Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), and Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen. Together, these organizations, along with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, are referred to as Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM). All of these associated movements are the (or a) center of disorder in their regions. Radicals in Somalia have even struck in non-contiguous Uganda, to pay that African Union country back for its attempts at peacekeeping in Somalia. Many groups in AQAM have become more radicalized. AQAM information operations continue unabated. So-called *jihadi* websites are important for communication, recruiting, and rallying the radical faithful. Independent, lone wolf, or small group terrorists thrive on these websites, and have struck or attempted to strike in the UK, the United States, and continental Europe.

In the past year, in the United States alone, terrorists with overseas aid attempted to attack twice: once with the failed "underwear bomber," an AQAP-trained Nigerian, named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, in a plane bound for Detroit, Michigan; and a failed attack on Times Square by an American citizen, Faisal Shahzad, who had been aided by the Pakistani Taliban. An attack on the New York city subway system by an AQ-assisted Afghan, Najibullah Zazi, a legal resident of the United States, was thwarted by federal agents and local law enforcement authorities. In a senseless attack, a radicalized Arab-American Army psychiatrist, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, killed 13 unarmed soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, before being wounded and taken into custody by Department of Defense police officers. Sadly, this officer, a sub-standard doctor, gave numerous indications of his growing radicalization, but his Medical Corps superiors failed to take appropriate actions.

There is some evidence, however, that Al Qaeda is losing the ideological battle in the Islamic world. Their loss of support is in large measure due to the fact that AQAM's victims in the past few years have been overwhelmingly other Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Pew Foundation polls show waning confidence in Usama Bin Laden (UBL) in nearly every major Islamic country, except Nigeria, half of which is Muslim. Support for suicide bombing has also plummeted in the vast majority of countries in the Islamic world. In 2010, a major *fatwa* produced by the Council of Senior Ulema (Religious Scholars) in Saudi Arabia once again condemned terrorism in all of its forms and proclaimed for the first time that the financing or support of terrorism was a violation of Islamic *sharia*. In March of this year, a Pakistani mullah in London, Tahir ul-Qadir, published a 600 page *fatwa*, condemning Al Qaeda's ideology, terrorism under any circumstances, and suicide bombing. His organization has links to mosques and centers in over 50 countries.

At the same time that favorable opinions of terrorism declined, approval of the United States leadership improved over the previous Administration, even if it declined slightly in most countries since its high in 2009. Still, less than 25% of the population in Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan --- all important US allies --- has a favorable opinion of United States. The

United States is not yet winning the battle of ideas in the war on terrorism, but Al Qaeda with its cruelty and inhumanity has lost significant support in the Islamic world.

The Campaign at Home

While terrorists have struck in many countries --- the United Kingdom, Spain, India, Pakistan, and Uganda to name just a few --- they have not since 9/11 had a major strike on the US territory. In part, this has to do with major advances in homeland security and improvements in intelligence, including intelligence cooperation with our allies. Homeland Security's partnerships with state, local, and private sector entities, as well as its improvements in transportation and infrastructure security have also been noteworthy. In part, however, our good fortune is just that.

There are, however, some serious downsides to our efforts at home. Rapid gains in effectiveness have come at the expense of efficiency. Recent reports from Dana Priest and William Arkin in the *Washington Post* have spoken to the explosion in national security contracting, and allege great waste and inefficiencies in intelligence and homeland security. At the same time, our intelligence agencies, vast and well-financed, have a spotty record of "connecting the dots," as they were able to do when they broke up a plot to plant bombs in the New York city subway system. There have also been disconnects between the Attorney General and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), and open disputes between the director of the CIA and his boss, the DNI. The last two terrorist incidents --- the underwear bomber in the skies over Detroit and the Times Square bomber in New York city--- could have caused serious damage, except that their bombs malfunctioned. We were fortunate that on-scene civilians and local law enforcement personnel were alert and took appropriate action to exploit these terrorist failures.

There is clearly room for efficiencies in intelligence and homeland security, including better information sharing, coordination, and ending bureaucratic duplication of effort. At the same time, it is worth remembering an old saw: in Washington, there are only two kinds of developments: policy successes and intelligence failures. Regardless of bureaucratic obstacles, at home and abroad, many intelligence successes will continue to go unseen and unheralded.

The Campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan

Abroad, the United States has become embroiled in two protracted insurgencies, one in Afghanistan, as a direct result of 9/11, and the other in Iraq, which came about in part because of misguided fears and unrealistic ambitions. In Iraq, the Bush Administration's worried that the point of maximum danger in the future would come at the intersection of vicious tyrants, state support for terrorism, and on-going efforts to proliferate weapons of mass destruction. Much of the data behind that projection proved incorrect. A lightning fast conventional military operation with little international backing turned into a prolonged insurgency with devastating effects on US standing in the world.

The U.S. war in Iraq appears to be winding down. From 2006 to 2007, the country descended into a maelstrom of violence. President Bush, after his party was punished harshly at the polls in 2006, decided not to quit Iraq but to surge combat forces into Baghdad and a few other key areas.

Around the same time, the Maliki government stepped up its game, and most importantly, the people of Iraq turned on Al Qaeda in Iraq and through local militias began to restore order and a degree of civility to their own country. Toward the end of its term, with violence at low ebb, the Bush Administration was able to negotiate a phased withdrawal, coupled with a high level of continuing security assistance.

To date, the Obama team has generally followed the withdrawal timetable, but disorder has increased in the past few months, militias have become energized, and worst of all, after a close election, neither Allawi, the nominal winner of the election, nor Maliki, the current Prime Minister, have been able to form a government. Unless this logjam is broken, the situation there will continue to worsen, and the United States will find that withdrawing its final set of advise-and-assist forces will be very difficult. Iraq is not yet on sound and secure footing, a fact which no doubt has caught the attention of the Iranian neighbors, who are eager to " help" their Shiite brethren at the expense of the Great Satan.

The situation in Afghanistan is familiar to the readers of these pages. The Taliban successes from 2005-09, have been answered by a surge of US and European forces, now numbering 140,000. New operations have started in Helmand and Kandahar in the south, and local defense initiatives will soon introduce community police in many areas of the country. The Obama Administration has markedly stepped up drone attacks and other counterterrorist operations, but has also proclaimed that it will begin to turn over security responsibilities to the Afghans in July 2011. US cooperation with Pakistan --- a nation with ties to the Taliban and the government in Afghanistan --- has been stepped up. Reconciliation feelers are coming from a number of Taliban sources.

Karzai, for his part, is promising that by 2014 the security lead, nationwide, will be in Afghan hands, suggesting a miraculously intensive development of civil authorities, the Afghan Army, and the nation's fledgling police force. Most experts believe that if this war is to be won, it will be won by the Karzai government, which is seen by many to be corrupt and ineffective. Nine years into the war, two 64 dollar questions remain: 1) Will the Karzai government gain the capacity and the legitimacy it needs to win the support of the people to stand up to the zealous cadres of the Taliban; and 2) Can the United States and its allies stay the course long enough to help the Kabul government get on its feet?

The Way Ahead

In all, the war on terrorism has run a long and torturous course, but it shows few signs of coming to an end. Each of its major facets --- the global war against Al Qaeda, the homeland campaign, the campaigns in Iraq, and Afghanistan --- argues for a glass half full/glass half empty assessment. While Americans can be proud of the efforts of their government, there is much fine tuning to be done. The war itself is not fading away, but the passage of time is changing the contours of the conflict and how we deal with it. It is time to re-look the entirety of the war on terrorism and the issue of how well we are organized for protracted conflict.

The first key task for the Obama Administration will be to refine its overall approach to the war on terrorism, which it refers to as the war against Al Qaeda. It needs an overarching concept of

where the war on terrorism is and where it is going, and how the Administration will deal with it. On the up side, the Administration has admirably tried to broaden its approach to the Muslim world, downplay its predecessor's fixation on the war on terrorism, and set out a legal system-centered course to deal with terrorists and detainees. But the road has been strewn with obstacles. In other venues, the Administration has fought to maintain Bush-era Executive prerogatives to fight terror, and it has also stepped up drone attacks and other methods of direct action against terrorists.

On the downside, it declared the closing of Guantanamo within a year without a plan to make that happen. It sought to try the 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad in a federal court in Manhattan, a proposal that met with little support nationwide. The Administration also had trouble articulating the role of military commissions, as opposed to the federal judiciary. The balance of effort between these two systems remains unclear.

At home, one element of the overall design must include a re-look at our complex organization for homeland security and intelligence. Abroad, the Administration should reconsider its organization in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A General, an Admiral, a Special Envoy, two Ambassadors might be necessary for top level management in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but is this the optimal organization for prosecuting and resolving that complex war? Do we need a Viceroy? In a similar vein, strategists today need to think through long-term US relations with Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan. A partnership agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan is also long overdue. Common interests, security cooperation, and trade are the mortar that will hold together these strategic partnerships long after the war on terrorism is forgotten.

A second key task for the Administration will be to think through the evolving threat. We were surprised when airplane hijackers mixed their craft with that of the suicide bomber, and in the process created an ersatz weapon of mass destruction. We have seen the emergence of lone wolves and the ethnic, racial, and gender diversification of terrorists. Other new wrinkles may involve chemical or biological agents. Alternatively, we may find alliances of convenience between gangs, drug cartels, and international terrorists. Imagine if IED detonations on US highways --- paid for by terrorists but executed by transnational gangs --- became an everyday occurrence. The old and comfortable distinction between national security and homeland security issues may well disappear in the next decade. Changes in how we deal with such hybrid threats will challenge our creativity and flexibility.

A third key task will be to be more efficient in how we fight the war on terrorism. The explosion of security contractors at home and abroad is clearly out of control. Given an ailing economy and huge deficits, the Obama Administration and its security team also need to think more about how to help its allies fight their own insurgencies. Just as in the post-Vietnam era, when the United States shifted to the security assistance-centered Nixon Doctrine, we need to help our allies help themselves in carrying out their own counterinsurgencies, while at the same time saving U.S. manpower and money. Some have labeled this approach as "COIN Light," but in the end, local governments have to win their wars, not the United States. Building capacity of allies is a critical military and diplomatic task, and one where we have not done well in Afghanistan. Iraq, of course, had much greater human capital to build on than Afghanistan does.

A fourth key task will be to assess the role of the all volunteer force (AVF) in protracted conflict. It may not have been clear in 2001, but the AVF was designed for short-duration wars. Nine years of fighting have not only stressed the active and reserve forces to the breaking point, but protracted war has encouraged the contractor-ization of the American way of war. Contractors doing security work and intelligence operations have been both boon and burden from the start. If we want to keep this, we clearly need rules of the road. What are the limits for the U.S. government licensing one of its most important tasks: the application and management of violence for state interests.

With an eye on protracted wars, we need to re-look the active military, reserve, civilian, contractor mix. When we do, we may find that the All Volunteer Force needs a reserve draft to enable it to function well in long duration conflicts. Such a draft, even if voluntary, could also forge a new link between emerging elites and the nation's Armed Forces. In a similar vein, we need to continue to find ways to integrate more U.S. civilians into overseas stability operations. State and USAID have made some progress. Indeed, in Afghanistan today, we have 1,000 civilians working with our soldiers in the field. Nine years into the war, however, the so called "whole of government" approach remains a neophyte; combat soldiers continue to take up the slack, standing in for their scarce civilian counterparts.

A final key task for the Administration will be to balance politics and policy as it winds down its troop commitments. For Iraq and Afghanistan, the Administration will have to decide in the near future whether the accent is on Exit or Strategy. Politics in the near term favors nice, neat schedules and the relatively rapid withdrawal of US forces. Good policy, however, may mean taking a more strategic view, and withdrawing forces in a way that makes sense, given conditions on the ground. Iraq and Afghanistan in particular are in delicate states, and the United States should be wary of following time-tables that were made up months ago. It will be important to adjust plans to circumstances, since the opposite is very risky. Statesmanship in the war on terrorism may require short-term domestic political setbacks for policy initiatives that will be in the long-term interest of the nation.

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