The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science

http://ann.sagepub.com

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/618/1/197

Additional services and information for *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* **can be found at:**

Email Alerts: http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ann.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/618/1/197

The Resurgent and Persistent Threat of al Qaeda

By
REID SAWYER
and
MICHAEL FOSTER

While the "Global War on Terror" has succeeded in constricting al Qaeda's ability to operate, it has not eliminated the threat. Al Qaeda is stronger and more resilient than at any time since 2001 due to its ability to adapt, innovate, and reconfigure its resources in response to a hostile counterterrorism environment. This article presents a new framework for considering the war against al Qaeda. Policy makers must recognize that the current conflict is not a single conflict, but rather three conflicts: a war of action, a war of networks, and a war of ideas. Viewing al Qaeda in this manner will facilitate the integration of counterterrorism policy and strategy from the tactical to the strategic level. Furthermore, the failure to understand why al Qaeda has survived and prospered precludes the development and deployment of a cogent counterterrorism strategy. Finally, the authors present a set of policy recommendations structured around this framework.

Keywords: al Qaeda; terrorist group longevity; U.S. counterterrorism strategy; terrorism framework; Global War on Terror; war of ideas

Insurgents win as long as they do not lose, governments lose as long as they do not win.[1]

The attacks of September 11, 2001, provided a stark warning that counterterrorism analysts had misjudged the nature of the terrorist threat facing the United States. While the ensuing "Global War on Terror" succeeded in constricting the ability of al Qaeda to operate with impunity, it did not eliminate the threat. Al Qaeda not only has survived and sustained its position in the global security environment but has also gained a competitive advantage in relation to the

United States and its counterterrorism efforts. This frustrating and troublesome state of affairs is due to two sets of conditions: (1) al Qaeda's ability to react, respond, and, to some extent, shape the security environment; and (2) the unwillingness, and perhaps inability, of the United States to recognize the true nature of the threat and a general failure to contest key issues in an effective manner.

Al Qaeda's adaptation and survival represents a substantial setback for counterterror governments and an immeasurable moral victory for al Qaeda and its followers. But al Qaeda has done more than simply survive; it has undergone a resurgence. The July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate concluded that

> Al-Qa'ida is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities. We assess the group has protected and regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safe haven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), operational lieutenants, and its top leadership. (Director of National Intelligence 2007)[2]

All of this stands in stark contrast with two key facts: (1) al Qaeda has achieved these goals while being subjected to the most significant counterterrorism efforts in the history of modern terrorism, and (2) 90 percent of terrorist organizations fail within a year, and 50 percent of those that last longer than a year fail within ten years (Rapoport 1992, 1067).

This situation has renewed calls by the academy and policy community alike to study the circumstances under which terrorist groups decline and how we might apply those principles to countering al Qaeda (Cronin 2006; Crenshaw 1991).[3] Without an understanding of the factors contributing to al Qaeda's longevity, it will be difficult to develop a cogent, comprehensive, and forward-looking counterterrorism strategy. Unfortunately, we lack a theoretical paradigm with which to explain al Qaeda's longevity and ultimate resurgence.

What brought us to this place where today al Qaeda is stronger and more robust six years into the global war on terror? Looking for causation in any one location is dangerous and insufficient. Nonetheless, we have identified three

Major Reid Sawyer is the director of the Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy and a founding member of the Center. A career military intelligence officer, he has served in a variety of special operations assignments, most recently in Iraq. He has also been appointed to the Fire Department of New York's Terrorism Task Force. He has lectured widely on terrorism and counterterrorism and is the coeditor of two books, Terrorism and Counterterrorism *(McGraw-Hill 2005) and* Defeating Terrorism *(McGraw-Hill 2003). He earned his bachelor's degree from the United States Military Academy, holds a master's of public administration from Columbia University, and is currently completing his doctorate at Columbia University.*

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Foster, a career infantryman, has commanded in the 82nd Airborne Division and the 75th Ranger Regiment. He has held a variety of assignments through more than twelve years in special operations and has served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He earned his undergraduate degree from the United States Military Academy. He is currently stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

essential issues that have contributed to al Qaeda's survival and ultimate resurgence. First, policy makers must recognize that the current conflict is not so much a war on terror per se as a war against al Qaeda. Furthermore, this is not a single conflict, as the current strategy understands the problem, but rather three wars: a war of action, a war of networks and a war of ideas.[4] Counterterror governments have yet to come to terms with the nature of the enemy they face. While decision makers may cognitively understand that al Qaeda is a complex entity that is both an organization and a movement, they have not adjusted their counterterrorism strategies to account for the multifaceted nature of the threat. Second, al Qaeda's durability and ultimate resurgence is due to its operational capabilities and, ultimately, its ability to respond to the dynamic security environment. Third, the failure to come to terms with these two issues precludes the development and deployment of a cogent counterterrorism strategy.

The Way Forward—A New Paradigm for Counterterrorism Strategy

The success that al Qaeda has realized in the past six years is not wholly attributable to its foresight, strategic planning, or organizational design. Many of al Qaeda's achievements result from the failure of counterterror governments to challenge al Qaeda across the entire spectrum of conflict. To date, the vast majority of counterterrorism efforts have been focused against the war of action using tactical kinetic operations, that is, direct military action against individuals or terrorist cells. As critical as such operations are, it must be remembered that this is also a war against regional and global jihadist networks and, perhaps most important, a conflict of ideas and ideologies. An integrated counterterrorism strategy must be developed leveraging *all* instruments of national power against different facets of this conflict.

The three wars are inexorably linked together and cannot be separated. Since declaring war against the United States in 1996, al Qaeda has been waging its struggle across all three of these levels. Bin Laden and his lieutenants presciently understood that operations at each level reinforced efforts on the other levels. Victories by al Qaeda in the war of action allow it to mobilize greater resources and build more comprehensive networks. The stronger the networks become, the more they promote and disseminate al Qaeda's ideology, allowing for new members to participate in the fight.[5] The initial failure by the United States to recognize these three distinct levels and the subsequent failure to develop a multifaceted counterterrorism strategy to address them has permitted al Qaeda to conduct a global terror campaign on these fronts unabated and largely unchecked.

The war of action. The war that Americans are most familiar with involves the military, law enforcement, and intelligence instruments of national power; it consists of tactical operations and is measured in minutes, hours, and days. For al

Qaeda, the war of action involves the deployment of improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers, or other means of attack. For example, in the spring of 2007, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) began using chlorine designated for water treatment and other commercial efforts in improvised explosive devices to make chlorine bombs. Three such attacks occurred in Iraq on March 16, 2007, in the space of three hours: a pickup truck carrying chlorine and explosives wounded one and killed another; two hours later, a dump truck carrying chlorine wounded more than one hundred residents south of Fallujah, requiring medical attention for "skin and lung irritation and vomiting"; and the third, less than an hour later, involved a tanker carrying two hundred gallons of chlorine that "sickened about 250 people" ("U.S. Says Iraq Chlorine Bomb Factor Was al Qaeda's" 2007; Brulliard 2007). Such incidents are designed strategically to instill fear as much as to wound and kill the target population.

For the United States, the war of action requires *intelligence* operations to find individuals or cells associated with al Qaeda and *kinetic* operations to either capture or kill these members. The killing and capture of 80 percent of al Qaeda's global leadership structure as well as the degradation of AQI forces represent significant victories for the United States in the war of action, constraining al Qaeda's operational capabilities by attacking its constitutive parts. Each individual operation against a cell or leader introduces friction into al Qaeda's operating environment, depleting its capability to conduct terror campaigns and expand its organization.

The war of networks.[6] The ability of al Qaeda "to create a loosely coupled system of associate organizations and transform their mindset from concentration on *territorial* objectives to the objective of the global jihad against the West" has greatly expanded the scope and power of the organization (Goolsby 2005, 9). The war of networks is a midterm fight waged over months and years, focusing on the relationships between the constitutive elements of the organization. It is also aimed at the multiple and overlapping support networks that facilitate the recruitment, radicalization, and movement of foreign fighters; communication throughout the organization; and the acquisition and distribution of weapons and chemical precursors for conventional explosives. These networks can be small—geographically limited to a particular province—or transnational.

Since 2001, counterterrorism forces have achieved some significant success in the war of networks. The disruption of the Haqqani foreign fighter network in Afghanistan (Dinneen 2007) and the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq represent two important milestones. Yet, as important as these victories have been, their impact in the larger picture is limited. Networks cannot be "viewed as objects of *pure structure* whose participants are *fixed in time*" but instead must be understood as a set of interconnected and continually evolving relationships (Watts 2003, 28). Given their inherent dynamic nature, networks must be stressed at multiple points, and in a coordinated manner, to effectively degrade their operations. Despite the difficulty of this endeavor, the war of

networks is where counterterrorism forces can best constrain the terrorists' strategic operating environment.

The war of ideas. The war of ideas is the most complex and difficult for counterterror governments to comprehend and influence; it involves a long-term fight that will be waged over years and decades. Al Qaeda masterfully defined the role of Islam in oppositional terms to the secular world, setting the agenda for the present conflict. "Indeed, al-Qa'ida leaders have had the greatest effect in translating their ideological appeal into action when they can marry their global worldview with anti-Americanism and local political objectives" (U.S. Senate 2007).

Al Qaeda's ideology provides not only credibility to the organization but also the sacred authority for its actions. This ideology functions to bind local grievances to the global fight. It connects disparate elements of the jihad in such a way that actions at any level facilitate the fight of all, thus creating a global identity. Ideology "frames organizational structure, leadership and membership motivation, recruitment and support, and shapes the strategies and tactics adopted by the group" (Gunaratna 2005, 1).

Unfortunately, the United States, and the West overall, have yet to contest this battle space in a meaningful way, allowing al Qaeda's perspective to become the dominant, and in many cases the sole, narrative. This failure allows al Qaeda to retain the ability to draw adherents to its cause, forming new organizations with new resource bases to wage new campaigns of violence against the United States and its interests around the world.

Unfortunately, the United States, and the West overall, have yet to contest [the War of Ideas] in a meaningful way, allowing al Qaeda's perspective to become the dominant, and in many cases the sole, narrative.

Conceptualizing the fight against al Qaeda in these three dimensions provides the basis for the better deployment of a balanced counterterrorism strategy. The United States's ability to prosecute the war of action is without parallel. The professionals in the intelligence community and the special operations forces perform this task superbly and tirelessly. However, as we have seen, the war of action alone is not sufficient to achieve success against al Qaeda. Moreover, this aspect

of the conflict presently is overwhelmingly confined to the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters of operation, leaving al Qaeda unchecked in other areas. Ultimately, no matter the successes on the tactical level, the failure to succeed across *all* levels of this fight will allow al Qaeda to respond, adapt, and set the operational and strategic tempo for its actions. It is a biological truth that if an organism is not stressed to the point of failure, it will only grow stronger—as we have witnessed with al Qaeda over the past six years.

Conceptualizing the fight against al Qaeda as one of multiple wars would provide three advantages. First, it would allow the United States to shape the strategic fight. Second, by shaping the context of this fight, the United States could force al Qaeda to respond to its actions at the strategic level, instead of the current reactionary position. Third, the United States would be afforded the opportunity to exploit al Qaeda's mistakes. Until the United States achieves a posture integrating its efforts across these dimensions, its counterterrorism efforts will remain unbalanced and, at times, counterproductive.

Al Qaeda's Durability and Regenerative Capacity

Despite the fact that most organizations are largely inert and ultimately fail over time (O'Reilly and Tushman 2007, 2), al Qaeda has managed to not only survive but to prosper. An effective counterterrorism strategy must explicitly account for al Qaeda's high degree of complexity and its ability to adapt, innovate, and self-organize in the face of a hostile security environment (Hayden 2007, 293). Al Qaeda's longevity and durability can be understood as a "strong coupling between evolutionary dynamics of the groups that engage in terrorist activities; their strategies and tactics; the social, cultural, and political systems within which they are embedded; and the infrastructures available to these groups for sustaining their operations" (Hayden 2007, 293).

Two elements account for longevity in terrorist organizations. First, a terrorist organization must possess a minimal set of operational capabilities that permit it to compete in the *current* security environment (O'Reilly and Tushman 2007, 7).[7] Al Qaeda's operational capabilities allow it to coordinate and focus its behavior to achieve fitness with the security environment.[8] Three specific sets of critical resources, working in conjunction with one another, enable al Qaeda's durability.[9]

- *Dynamic organizational structure:* Al Qaeda possesses both hierarchical, networked organizational elements as well as characteristics of a distributed social movement that is multigenerational, without a geographic center, and transnational in nature. As such, it is exceptionally difficult to detect and interdict. The organizational side of al Qaeda is gaining in strength while the movement is gaining in breadth and diversity; together, they allow the organization to leverage multiple and diverse resource bases, draw upon worldwide "labor markets" and withstand intensive counterterrorism efforts.
- *Radicalization:* Al Qaeda's ability to replenish its ranks and retain support for its movement hinges upon sophisticated yet accessible radicalization processes. Al Qaeda, like

any organization, requires the influx of new members to offset attrition and benefits from an increasingly global radical Islamic movement. Al Qaeda is only one part of a larger Salafist constellation existing "at the apex of a pyramid of a larger, diverse social system of sympathizers and supporters that exert multiple influences" (Hayden 2007, 296). Organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jama'at, Supporters of Sharia, among others, promote radical visions of Islam that, while not necessarily aligned with al Qaeda, create a charged environment and promote similar ideas.[10] Governments must come to terms with the nature and extent of this charged environment and what it means for the further radicalization of new members.

- *Sanctuary:* Terrorist organizations do not exist in an undefined dimension of space; instead, they are located within sovereign countries. The sanctuary al Qaeda has enjoyed, especially in Pakistan, provided it with the "the time and space to develop the ability to perform competent planning and to assemble the people, money, and resources needed" (Kojm and Ginsburg 2004) to reestablish the organization and begin to reassert control over the al Qaeda network. The luxury sanctuary provides al Qaeda cannot be emphasized enough in discussing its durability.

Over time, the combination of al Qaeda's dynamic organizational structure, its successful radicalization processes and its sanctuary created structures "that increase the probabilities of future success" for the organization (Bingham and Davis 2000, 956).

Second, while its operational capabilities and resources are central to al Qaeda's durability, by themselves they are not sufficient to explain al Qaeda's long-run performance (Teece 2007, 1320). Survival only provides "a clear measure of whether a firm can adapt to its external environment at some minimally satisfactory level" (Helfat et al. 2007, 15). A terrorist organization may be resource-rich and yet unable to maintain market share. For example, AQI raised immense amounts of cash, estimated at more than $100 million annually ("Suspected '100 Million Dollar al-Qaeda Financier' Netted in Iraq" 2007),[11] yet it was not able to sustain itself over the long term in the face of sustained counterterrorism operations.

Instead, al Qaeda's resurgence and performance hinge upon its ability to "integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments" (Cavusgil, Seggie, and Talay 2007, 164). The ability of an organization to respond to a rapidly changing security environment depends on three factors: the ability to (1) sense or search for opportunities in the security environment, (2) select the right opportunity, and (3) deploy its assets in a manner to leverage the opportunity in an efficient and effective manner (O'Reilly and Tushman 2007, 17). This dynamic was evident in 2003 when al Qaeda senior leaders decided to shift fighters from Afghanistan and planned to halve the organization's $3 million monthly allotment to the Afghan jihad to support the fight in Iraq (Yousafzai, Moreau, and Hirsch 2003). Resources are currently being shifted from Iraq back to Afghanistan. Al Qaeda's ability to change and adapt, both in anticipation of, and in reaction to, the changing security environment provides a great deal of insight about the organization and its associated movement.

Strategic Imperatives for the Future

It is possible to identify several critical areas for action that may be pursued at all three levels of the conflict.

War of action

Understanding the threat. Any future strategy must address the linkages between the cells targeted in the war of action and the broader movement in the war of networks. Following the loss of sanctuary in Afghanistan, the severe degradation of al Qaeda's network supported the conclusion that al Qaeda was no longer a functioning organization in the traditional sense of the word but rather had become an inspiration propelling its disparate movement forward. However, the intelligence community continues to view al Qaeda primarily as a networked organization with a command and control structure, some level of hierarchy (however loose it may be), foreign fighter facilitation networks, operational cells, logistical support elements, and regional "franchised" organizations. Such an approach is appealing because it presents identifiable structures that can be observed and targeted and provides a mechanism to measure progress.

At the strategic level, viewing al Qaeda as an organized network overlooks the very essence that has provided the organization with its resilience and lifeblood over the past six years: its broad and geographically diverse movement. Furthermore, this approach suggests that the threat can be defeated by attacking organizational elements. As long as al Qaeda's ideology remains attractive and individuals see incentives to answer the call to arms, al Qaeda will continue to survive.[12] Insofar as al Qaeda is a movement, an amorphous entity without boundaries, it is difficult to identify and target key nodes. Even when these elements can be identified, there is no assurance that targeting these nodes would have any effect on the overall movement, further complicating the prioritization of targets.

In short, the movement is the engine driving al Qaeda. Without an integrated and comprehensive strategy to address *both* the organization and the movement, al Qaeda's ability to regenerate will remain unabated. An appreciation that the two dimensions of al Qaeda exist in a mutually reinforcing manner will help governments avoid a myopic focus on the organizational elements.

Disrupt critical lines of communication. At the tactical level, resources should be dedicated to disrupting al Qaeda's lines of communication through the killing and capture of senior leaders and central nodes. These intelligence and kinetic operations must be enemy-oriented. To accomplish this goal, tactical counterterrorism actions must be expanded beyond declared combat zones to apply continuous pressure to al Qaeda's elements wherever they may be found. This does not require a large U.S. force structure or footprint but rather aggressive bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to enable these operations and facilitate the development of host nation counterterrorism capabilities. Simply put, the United States

cannot succeed in the war on terror without the assistance of coalition partners.

War of networks

Sanctuary. The al Qaeda senior leadership must not be allowed sanctuary. The reemergence of the senior leaders in an operational and strategic role over the past twenty-four months necessitates a new strategy. Presently, al Qaeda enjoys complete sanctuary in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of western Pakistan, where the al Qaeda leadership has "reestablished significant control over their once-battered worldwide terror network and over the past year has set up a band of training camps . . . near the Afghan border" (Mazzetti and Rohde 2007; Laabs and Rotella 2007; Mekhennet and Moss 2007; Abbas 2007). The intelligence community has concluded that the FATA sanctuary has allowed al Qaeda to regenerate "key elements of its Homeland attack capability" (Director of National Intelligence 2007).

The return of the region to prominence accomplishes three goals for al Qaeda. First and most important, the reemergence of training camps signals to al Qaeda's worldwide supporters that it remains a vibrant organization and allows these supporters to point to these camps as evidence of al Qaeda's continued strength. Second, the camps provide a physical location for jihadists around the world to gather, train, perpetuate their virulent ideology, and plan for new attacks. Third, the camps provide a venue and opportunity for jihadists to develop personal and long-lasting relationships with other like-minded individuals, thereby strengthening the long-term prospects of the network. These camps are particularly significant for European jihadists, who come to be trained and indoctrinated and then return home with enhanced "street credibility." With this training and newfound credibility, they become "cell-builders," who now have the luxury to build cells and train those who could not attend such camps, further expanding the reach and impact of the organization.[13]

Whereas counterterrorism is typically focused on the enemy and its support structures, we may have to redefine the threat in terms of geography and adopt a strategy of denial. There are tremendous geopolitical obstacles to achieving this goal in Pakistan, yet there is little doubt that this should be the main effort. For the future, it means that al Qaeda must be denied access to those areas in which it is interested. This requires forward planning by the intelligence community as well as meaningful bilateral diplomacy to work with the concerned governments.

Furthermore, al Qaeda's virtual sanctuary on the Internet must be challenged at every turn. Unfortunately, the jihadist Internet presence now numbers in the excess of fifty-six hundred Web sites, with nine hundred new sites being added each year (Hassan 2007), and the Internet now figures prominently in strategic efforts. Al Qaeda, and in particular, al Qaeda in Iraq's efforts to disseminate news of attacks and the progress of the jihad have increased markedly over the past four years. This unchecked expansion provides al Qaeda the opportunity to recruit new members, offer "distance learning" opportunities for potential

jihadists, and enhance tactical operations.[14] While an exodus of foreign fighters from Iraq may pose significant challenges, the imminent danger arises from the diffusion of tactical and technical lessons learned by al Qaeda in Iraq. The transfer of technology to other theaters of operation, such as Afghanistan, increases the lethality and efficiency across the entire organization and movement and speeds up the rate at which al Qaeda can expand its reach and influence. In effect, technology enables al Qaeda to offset the asymmetries inherent in the fight with the United States.[15]

Networks. The United States must deny al Qaeda the ability to merge and create formal alliances with other Salafist groups. Each time al Qaeda is able to form a strategic partnership, it enhances the durability of the overall organization. Assisting coalition partners in this fight is critical to prevent these mergers from occurring. When such alliances emerge, they must be disrupted before they become fully operational. Through mergers, al Qaeda realized increased synergies by sharing strategic intelligence, resources, and tactical expertise; reinforcement of organizational functions (thus enhancing the durability and survivability of the overall organization); and an expanded global reach. In the past three years, "40 organizations have announced their formation and pledged their allegiance to bin laden, al Qaeda and their strategic objectives" (Scheuer 2007). Many have mistakenly viewed al Qaeda's mergers as a sign of weakness, but nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, the continued interest of organizations to join with al Qaeda reflects the significant appeal and pervasive nature of its ideology.

For example, in November 2006, al Qaeda completed a formal merger with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Islamist organization based in Algeria. While the two groups had been cooperating since 2005, in November 2006, GSPC changed its name to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and took up al Qaeda's banner, launching attacks in Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia and conducting its first attacks against U.S. interests (McGregor 2007). The merger not only serves as a force multiplier for al Qaeda but also created new pathways for individuals to participate in the jihad. Those seeking training or access to the networks no longer have to find their way to remote areas of Pakistan to "enroll" in the fight. Instead, the training camps of AQIM present viable alternatives that, for many, are more accessible than other options. Thus, mergers effectively lower the barriers to entry of the jihad and increase the opportunity and access for participation. Moreover, AQIM's extensive European networks and access to the large North African Muslim diaspora in Europe present al Qaeda with new opportunities to gain access to established support and operational networks (Pargeter 2006, 733-35).[16] The failure to act allowed al Qaeda unprecedented access to new networks and resources and effectively extended the half-life of the organization.

Contested and uncontested battles. Central to any long-term success in this struggle is the aggressive pursuit of al Qaeda across its myriad of support, logistical, and operational networks. From the counterterrorist perspective, the

discernment of which battles matter is critical. Simply stated, the battles that the United States chooses to contest define the operating environment for al Qaeda.[17] The failure to identify and contest key battles will create endless opportunities for al Qaeda.

The contested battles are those opportunities where both al Qaeda and the counterterrorist seek to "win." Contesting a battle does not necessarily imply a symmetrical response or a direct confrontation.[18] Counterterror governments may use any or all instruments of national power in contesting an opportunity, with the outcome of these battles not always immediately clear. It is critically important for governments to anticipate the unintended or delayed consequences of these battles and work to mitigate their effects.

It is the uncontested battles, however, that present the greatest opportunity for al Qaeda to gain a competitive advantage. When uncontested, al Qaeda leaders are afforded the luxury to make decisions at their own pace and on their own terms.[19] Moreover, in these situations, al Qaeda can shape the security environment through a first-mover advantage, defining the rules of the game and forcing counterterror governments to react.

Emerging from this picture of uncontested and contested battles is a sense that the security environment is a "result of co-evolution and complex interaction between what might be thought of as ecosystem participants" (Teece 2007, 1322-23). Teece (2007, 1322-23) went on to say that "competitors may or may not see the opportunity, and even if they do they may calibrate it differently. Their actions, along with [other groups] . . . can also change the nature of the opportunity and manner in which competition will unfold." What matters most in this type of dynamic environment is the ability for counterterror governments to recognize and create opportunities and then to respond effectively to the opportunities presented.

War of ideas

Counter al Qaeda's narrative. Countering al Qaeda's message and ideology must be a long-term strategic priority. While sustained tactical and operational efforts against the war of action and war of networks are of vital importance, it is al Qaeda's ideology that underlies it and enables it to persevere. This will remain true for as long as this ideology is not discredited by actions by al Qaeda and the larger Salafist community, or until we successfully develop and deploy a meaningful counternarrative.

While the ability of any government to counter al Qaeda's narrative is limited, this goal still must be afforded the same priority as any kinetic efforts. The United States and its partners should challenge the terrorists' assertion that they alone represent and speak for the people. Perhaps more important, where governments cannot *directly* affect or shape the narrative, they must work to enable other actors to counter al Qaeda's narrative.

Iraq. Any strategic efforts to counter al Qaeda's narrative must take into account the conflict in Iraq. While there have been significant tactical, operational, and

strategic successes with the degradation of AQI, the Salafist extremists have also claimed their share of successes. AQI has caused the loss of thousands of lives, caused untold economic damage, and spurred spiraling sectarian violence. In the al Qaeda narrative, Iraq will serve as an example of U.S. hegemony and its perceived desire to destroy Sunni Islam. Given this stark reality, any efforts aimed at the war of ideas must account for the duality of this situation—the military success against AQI and the loss in terms of public opinion.

In conclusion, al Qaeda's durability presents the United States with a complex, dynamic, and dangerous threat. The policy recommendations put forward here form a strategic outline for a new approach to countering al Qaeda in the future. Redefining the war against al Qaeda as three wars—a war of action, a war of networks, and a war of ideas—will not only enable the United States to address al Qaeda's operational capabilities in an integrated manner but will also constrain al Qaeda's ability to adapt, innovate, and reconfigure its assets, thereby limiting its potential for long-term performance.

The U.S. government has the capacity and capability to prosecute simultaneously all three of these wars in a synchronized and coherent fashion, while posturing itself to identify and contest the overwhelming majority of battles it will face. The question that remains is whether the United States is willing to do what it takes to bring its capabilities and capacities to bear on the problem. Without such willingness, al Qaeda will remain free to do what we fear most.

Notes

1. Quote attributed to Stanley Hoffman; see Betts (2005, 392).

2. National Intelligence Estimates represent the conclusion of the sixteen national intelligence agencies within the intelligence community.

3. Cronin (2006, 8) argued that "the question of how terrorist groups decline is insufficiently studied, and the available research is virtually untapped. Yet it has a raft of implications for the challenges posed by al Qaeda and its associates, as well as for the counterterrorist policies of the United States and its allies, many of which reflect little awareness or scrutiny of the assumptions upon which they rest."

4. An unnamed senior government official offered the idea that the war against al Qaeda is really three wars: a war of action, a war of networks, and a war of ideas.

5. The Madrid bombing on March 11, 2004, highlights the interrelated nature of two levels. While the Spanish cell had limited, if any, meaningful contact with any al Qaeda members, the ten bombs that killed 191 people and wounded more than 1,800 was hailed as a victory for global jihad. Within a month after the attack, bin Laden referenced the Madrid attacks and offered a peace treaty with the West. By linking the Madrid attacks (war of action) with the larger global jihad (war of ideas), bin Laden was leveraging an action on one level to reinforce another level in the strategic jihad despite the fact that the attacks were not planned, coordinated, directed, or financed by al Qaeda. Nonetheless, the tragic loss of life and fallout from the elections provided al Qaeda an important moment on the international stage and set the example for other "homegrown" terrorists that share al Qaeda's worldview to follow.

6. Der Derian first used this concept in 2001, writing, "From the start, it was apparent that 9-11 was and would continue to be a war of networks."

7. All terrorist organizations require some minimal level of resources, which include "tangible, intangible, human assets as well as the capabilities an organization possesses or has access to on a preferential basis" (Helfat et al. 2007, 4).

8. The "resource base" of an organization reflects the available items the organization can leverage to accomplish its goals (Helfat et al. 2007, 4). Capabilities in this sense refer to an organization's ability

to "deploy its resources to achieve specific goals" (Cavusgil, Seggie, and Talay 2007, 160). We should not mistake the word "capability" to imply excellence. As Helfat et al. (2007, 5) noted, this term only implies "the potential for 'adequate performance.'"

9. There are a myriad of resource factors that could be included in this discussion. However, this article seeks to examine the elements *most* responsible for al Qaeda's durability. Absent any one of these three elements, it is difficult to envision a resilient organization.

10. In the United Kingdom, Scotland Yard estimates that as many as three thousand Britons have participated in al Qaeda training camps (Wiktorowicz 2005, 3). Hizb ut-Tahrir global membership numbers more than 150,000, up from 50,000 less than six years ago. Despite the fact that very few of these individuals are known to associate with jihadist causes, the "2005 Annual Report on the Protection of the Constitution" prepared by German counterterrorism officials noted that the "wide range of Islamist-oriented educational and support activities, especially for children and adolescents from immigrant families, are used to promote the creation and proliferation of an Islamist milieu in Germany . . . which could also form the breeding ground for further radicalization" (cited in Boukhars 2007). We must be careful not to oversubscribe linkages between other radical groups and al Qaeda where they do not exist; at the same time, we cannot forget this larger context contributes to the overall environment and context of radicalization.

11. An al Qaeda financier who was "suspected of handing over 50,000 dollars a month to al Qaeda [in Iraq] using his leather merchant business as a front" was captured in central Baghdad (Zavis 2007). This money was raised from a network of al Qaeda supporters in Europe and the Middle East. However, these amounts are small in comparison to the millions of dollars al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) raises annually through criminal enterprises inside of Iraq. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, this is just one example of the rampant corruption and crime that feeds all the various insurgent groups. (Zavis 2007).

12. Interestingly enough, since late 2005, al Qaeda has begun to reemerge as an organization. The senior leadership has attempted to reestablish control over al Qaeda elements in the Arabian Peninsula, attempted to regain a public presence in the jihad, and attempted to effect strategic change across the organization.

13. Musab al-Suri, a key jihadist ideologue detained in Pakistan in 2005, in his treatise on waging jihad titled "Global Islamic Resistance Call," used the term "cell builders" to refer to those who create and train their own cells after returning from al Qaeda training camps. A variant of this concept has gained traction among jihadists in different quarters.

14. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) released a video showing preparations to attack U.S. workers in Algeria that contained Google Earth images marking bus route carrying Haliburton workers, the location of the preparation of two bombs, and the attack itself.

15. In terms of technology, the advances made by AQI over the past four years of fighting have greatly expanded the organization's capabilities to survive and prosecute its terror campaign both in Iraq and abroad. Al Qaeda insurgents in Afghanistan have adopted the particular methods of improvised explosive device construction and the increased use of suicide bombers. Jihadist leaders have even gone so far as to travel between Afghanistan and Iraq to exchange ideas. See Scheuer (2007).

16. In another potentially dangerous development, an announcement was made late in 2007 that Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) had merged with al Qaeda, with the extent of the merger yet unknown. Evan Kholmann reported on November 3, 2007, that al Qaeda's media outlet, as-Saheb, carried an audio recording with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu al-Laith al-Liby, a principal in LIFG, in which Zawahiri announced, "Honorable members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group have announced that they are joining the Al-Qaida organization in order to continue the march of their brothers. . . . Your good sons are gathering [in the Maghreb] under the banner of Islam and jihad against America, France, Spain and their people" ("Libyan Islamists 'Join Al-Qaeda'" 2007).

17. The term "battle" is not used here solely in a military sense but rather to represent a contest between al Qaeda and the counterterror government. These battles represent opportunities such as alliances or mergers, the deployment of new technology or a contest of ideologies.

18. Sometimes the response is not direct, as when Ayman al-Zawahiri released a media interview through al-Sahab, May 5, 2007, and the U.S. aired a series of "commercials" built to respond to the themes in the interview. While these commercials were designed to "contest" that particular moment of ideological space, the commercials were not seen by the same audience and did not directly answer Zawahiri. Other times, the response is direct, as when in January 2007, the United States supported operations

against al Qaeda–aligned elements in the Horn of Africa and effectively "broke" their position, forcing many of them to abandon their sanctuary in Somalia.

19. Battles can be uncontested for one of four reasons. First, it may be impossible to contest a particular battle. If al Qaeda were to establish a new foreign fighter network in Syria, little could be done to counter it since we lack meaningful relations with the Syrian government. Second, we may choose not to contest an opportunity for strategic reasons, such as the need for continued intelligence collection against a given element that outweighed the disruption of that particular activity. Third, and potentially most damaging, are instances where we are not postured to identify an opportunity that needs to be contested, and consequently no response is considered. For instance, al Qaeda may develop a new training regime in the camps located in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region that is beyond observation. Fourth, a battle may be observed that can and should be addressed but, due to bureaucratic inertia, is not.

References

Abbas, Hassan. 2007. Increasing Talibanization in Pakistan's seven tribal agencies. *Terrorism Monitor* 18.

Betts, Richard. 2005. The soft underbelly of American primacy: Tactical advantages of terror. In *Terrorism and counterterrorism*, ed. Russell D. Howard and Reid L. Sawyer, 386-411. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bingham, Christopher, and Jason Davis. 2000. How do capabilities emerge and why do some firms develop them while others do not? *Strategic Management Journal* 21 (10/11): 955-59.

Boukhars, Anouar. 2007. The threat of Islamist terrorism to Germany. *Terrorism Monitor* 5 (7).

Brulliard, Karin. 2007. Chlorine blast kills 8; 6 troops also die in Iraq. *Washington Post*, March 18.

Cavusgil, Erin, Steven Seggie, and Mehmet Berk Talay. 2007. Dynamic capabilities view: Foundations and research agenda. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 15 (2): 159-66.

Crenshaw, Martha. 1991. How terrorism declines. *Terrorism & Political Violence* 3 (1): 69-87.

Cronin, Audrey Kurth. 2006. How al-Qaida ends: The decline and demise of terrorist groups. *International Security* 31 (1): 7-48.

Der Derian, James. 2001. The war of networks. *Theory & Event* 5 (4). http://muse.jhu.edu.monstera.cc .columbia.edu:2048/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.4derderian.html.

Dinneen, Timothy. 2007. ANSF, Coalition forces focus on Haqqani network: Combined Joint Task Force-82, Combined Press Information Center. http://sjtf-a.com/

Director of National Intelligence. 2007. The terrorist threat to the US homeland. In *National intelligence estimate*. Washington DC: Director of National Intelligence.

Goolsby, Rebecca. 2005. *Combating terrorist networks: An evolutionary approach*. Arlington, VA: Office of Naval Research.

Gunaratna, Rohan K. 2005. Ideology in terrorism and counter terrorism: Lessons from combating al Qaeda and Al Jemaah Al Islamiyah in Southeast Asia. Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC) Discussion Paper 5/42. http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/csrc/document-listings/special/ csrc_mpf-2005-10-17.

Hassan, Ibtihal. 2007. Al Qaeda-linked Web sites numbers 5,600. Reuters, December 4.

Hayden, Nancy. 2007. The complexity of terrorism. In *Mapping terrorism research: State of the art, gaps and future direction*, ed. M. Ranstorp, 219-352. London: Routledge.

Helfat, Constance, Sidney Finkelstein, Will Mitchell, Margaret Peteraf, Harbir Singh, David Teece, and Sidney Winter. 2007. *Dynamic capabilities: Understanding strategic change in organizations*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Kojm, Christopher, and Susan Ginsburg. 2004. Prepared statement of Deputy Executive Director Christopher Kojm and Team Leader Susan Ginsburg, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. House International Relations Committee, 10th Cong., 2nd sess., August 19.

Laabs, Dirk, and Sebastian Rotella. 2007. Terrorists in training head to Pakistan. *Los Angeles Times*, October 14.

Libyan Islamists "join Al-Qaeda." 2007. BBC, November 3. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7076604.stm.

Mazzetti, Mark, and David Rohde. 2007. Terror officials see al Qaeda chiefs regaining power. *New York Times*, February 19.

McGregor, Andrew. 2007. Leadership disputes plague al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb. *Terrorism Focus* 30.

Mekhennet, Souad, and Michael Moss. 2007. Europeans get terror training inside Pakistan. *New York Times*, September 10.

O'Reilly, Charles, and Michael Tushman. 2007. Ambidexterity as a dynamic capability: Resolving the innovator's dilemma. Working Paper, Harvard Business School Case Studies, Cambridge, MA.

Pargeter, Alison. 2006. North African immigrants in Europe and political violence. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (8): 731-47.

Rapoport, David. 1992. Terrorism. In *Routledge encyclopedia of government and politics*, ed. M. Hawkesworth and M. Kogan. London: Routledge.

Scheuer, Michael. 2007. Al-Qaeda and Algeria's G.S.P.C.: Part of a much bigger picture. *Terrorism Focus* 8.

Suspected "100 million dollar al-Qaeda financier" netted in Iraq. 2007. Agence France-Presse, October 4.

Teece, David. 2007. Explicating dynamic capabilities: The nature and microfundations of (sustainable) enterprise performance. *Strategic Management Journal* 28:1319-50.

U.S. says Iraq chlorine bomb factor was al Qaeda's. 2007. Reuters, February 24.

U.S. Senate. 2007. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Understanding terrorist ideology. 110th Cong., 1st ses., June 12.

Watts, Duncan. 2003. *Six degrees: The science of a connected age*. New York: Norton.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan. 2005. *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Yousafzai, Sami, Ron Moreau, and Michael Hirsch. 2003. Bin Laden's Iraq plans. *Newsweek*, December 15.

Zavis, Alexander. 2007. Iraqi militants feed on corruption. *Los Angeles Times*, October 26.