

President Obama's Overseas Terrorism Challenge

By Tom Sanderson

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA leads the United States at a time of heightened global insecurity. Economic hardship is increasing the ranks of weak and failing states that could serve as sanctuaries or incubators for terrorist groups. Although the U.S. homeland has not been attacked since September 11, 2001, extremists in Europe, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia remain a serious threat. With the election of President Barack Obama, the United States and the world are expecting a new approach to countering terrorism.¹ Almost three months into his presidency, the Obama administration has “repackaged” some Bush administration strategies, while at the same time making it clear that development, diplomacy, and other policies will garner greater emphasis.

The administration should capitalize on a unique opportunity to emphasize Barack Obama's widely admired personal story and interest in engaging the world to weaken key elements of the al-Qa`ida “narrative.” The weakening of this narrative could, in turn, reduce the terrorist group's recruitment capabilities and capacity to garner sympathy from the Muslim world. This article reviews the landscape of transnational terrorist threats and examines the Obama administration's early counterterrorism policies.

A Complex and Worsening Landscape

Despite the absence of an attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001, terrorism remains a threat and presents a great test for intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Since the September 11 attacks, al-Qa`ida has been damaged by effective Western policies to reduce its funding sources, the killing or capture of key personnel, and through its own excesses in Iraq. Nevertheless, it remains intact and potent. With proven global reach,

1 The anticipation for change was a result of Obama's early statements about the planned closure of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, the closure of CIA secret detention centers, and the repudiation of controversial interrogation techniques such as waterboarding.

a robust propaganda arm, training facilities, unrelenting motivation, and like-minded confederates in North Africa, the Middle East and beyond, it remains a direct threat to nation-states.

For the past several years, the primary focus of terrorist activity has been Iraq and South Asia. With a phased pullout of U.S. and coalition forces from Iraq underway, American attention has shifted to Afghanistan and Pakistan as both countries descend further into turmoil. With Pakistan's lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) serving as a terrorist safe haven, these two complex states play host to even more confounding insurgencies, elements of “al-Qa`ida central,” and criminal warlords, among other destabilizing forces. Former President George W. Bush's deputy national security adviser for combating terrorism, Juan Zarate, described this conflict zone (in particular Pakistan) as “the greatest geo-political problem confronting the Obama administration with its FATA safe-haven, creeping radicalization, nuclear weapons, and accommodation of radicals.”²

Pakistan, for its part, is both unwilling and unable to keep its territory from being used to launch attacks into Afghanistan, and is itself a target of extremist groups—many of which Islamabad had a direct hand in creating. Preoccupied by the potential for a fourth major war with its rival India—a country that has strengthened its relationship with the United States, and also its presence in Afghanistan—this tense situation is unlikely to change. Given the distinct possibility that the United States and other members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) may depart Afghanistan without having achieved clear victory, it is possible that al-Qa`ida would be revitalized for being perceived as the group responsible for such a defeat.

In addition to the abundance of violent groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan, there are a number of other trouble spots. In Bangladesh, extremist movements, which have already targeted the civilian leadership of Prime

2 This statement was made by Juan C. Zarate at a Center for Strategic and International Studies roundtable on March 11, 2009.

Minister Sheikh Hasina, could take advantage of a nation in turmoil that in February 2009 witnessed a mutiny by its own border guards.³ Coupled with severe stress on the environment, high levels of corruption, and a crowded population living in poverty and despair, Bangladesh is a dark cloud on the horizon.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has made strides in countering al-Qa`ida and its supporters since the attacks inside the kingdom began in earnest in May 2003. With thousands arrested and a “disengagement” program targeting young radicals, these developments, according to U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, “have rendered the kingdom a harsh operating environment for al-Qa`ida.”⁴

The greater regional threat is on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula in lawless Yemen, home to the largest contingent of prisoners still detained at Guantanamo Bay. A weak state, Yemen is host to extremists who operate with relative impunity in towns and across large areas of ungoverned tribal territory. It is from Yemen that many experts inside and outside of the government anticipate future plots against the West and its Arab allies. There are also signs that Yemeni militants affiliated with al-Qa`ida have traveled to nearby Somalia to collaborate with an al-Qa`ida-affiliated group of Islamist militants known as al-Shabab.⁵

Despite the serious damage suffered by al-Qa`ida, the group continues to benefit from a widely held perception that the West is leading a “Crusade” to destroy Islam and to occupy and exploit traditional Muslim lands. The global downturn, widely blamed on American “greed” and “arrogance,” will serve to reinforce this argument and prove to be valuable propaganda for extremists. Usama bin Ladin himself has reportedly used the U.S. financial

3 Julfikar Ali Manik and Somini Sengupta, “Army's Border Guards Rebel in Bangladesh,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2009.

4 Dennis C. Blair, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 12, 2009.

5 “Qaeda Bomber Behind Yemen Attack Trained in Somalia,” Reuters, March 17, 2009.

crisis as a propaganda tool, claiming that “the United States is staggering under the attacks of the mujahidin and their consequences...It is drowning in a financial crisis, so much so that it is begging from big and small countries alike.”⁶ With global unemployment surging, and crackdowns by anxious leaders worsening, this economic turn of events injects vigor and seeming validity into these arguments.⁷

Resetting the Counterterrorism Strategy?

With these conditions and threats facing the United States and its allies, the Obama administration needs an aggressive counterterrorism strategy, but one that is mindful of other foreign policy initiatives and of the message they deliver. It is to be expected that any new approach will be characterized by a more nuanced attitude from the White House. Much of Barack Obama’s popularity at home and abroad stems from his pre-election repudiation of certain Bush administration-era tactics and strategies against terrorist groups. Given the damaged reputation of al-Qa`ida—best visible by its erosion of support in Iraq—and the enthusiasm with which the world has greeted the new U.S. administration, there is an opportunity to make gains.

At first glance, the Obama administration’s initial few decisions might cause confusion as to where the president stands on controversial policies. While President Obama quickly ordered the closing of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, and directed all U.S. intelligence officers not to exceed the interrogation techniques found in the U.S. Army Field Manual, other decisions have signaled that some Bush administration policies will be kept in place or only altered slightly. A review of still emerging policies reveals broad objectives and continued, though modified, tactics.

President Bush’s 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism included four main pillars: 1) Prevent

6 On January 14, 2009, a new audiotape purportedly by Usama bin Ladin appeared on Islamist web forums. Bin Ladin claimed that the United States is “drowning in a financial crisis,” partly as a result of “mujahidin” attacks.

7 Michael T. Klare, “A Planet at the Brink: Will Economic Bushfires Prove Too Virulent to Contain?” TomDispatch.com, February 24, 2009.

attacks by terrorist networks; 2) Deny WMD to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them; 3) Deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states; and 4) Deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror.⁸ The Bush administration also strongly stressed “democracy promotion” as the long-term antidote to terrorism. The military, intelligence, financial, law enforcement, and diplomatic arms of the United States played key roles in carrying out these policies, although too much emphasis was probably placed on the military options. Some of the most controversial tactics employed by the United States included “extraordinary renditions” of terrorism suspects (a policy begun under President William J. Clinton);⁹ the use of interrogation techniques, such as “waterboarding,” that have been described as “torture”; warrantless surveillance of communication between terrorism suspects and U.S. citizens; the indefinite detention of suspects at Guantanamo Bay or in CIA secret overseas prisons; the suspension of habeas corpus for suspects; and the designation of captured individuals as “enemy combatants.” Even though some of these tactics ended before President Obama entered office—including the practice of waterboarding¹⁰ and the CIA’s use of secret prisons¹¹—it has been widely recognized that they caused damage to the U.S. reputation abroad.

While President Obama is canceling some Bush administration counterterrorism policies, a complete scrapping is not likely. The differences between the two presidents do not extend to the core policy of preventing attacks on the United States and its citizens, but rather to some of the techniques noted above, and to the manner with which the United States pursues its goals. President

8 George W. Bush, “National Strategy for Combating Terrorism,” White House National Security Council, September 2006.

9 “Fact Sheet: Extraordinary Rendition,” American Civil Liberties Union, December 6, 2005; Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

10 The last known case of waterboarding in the United States occurred in 2003. See Renee Schoof, “CIA Director Acknowledges Use of Water Boarding,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, February 5, 2008.

11 Don Gonyea, “Bush Concedes CIA Ran Secret Prisons Abroad,” National Public Radio, September 6, 2006.

Obama and his national security team, which includes several individuals who served in the Bush administration, recognize the threat posed by al-Qa`ida and other groups, especially those seeking WMD capabilities. The Obama administration, for example, has allowed the CIA to continue the practice of rendition to cooperating third countries, but is seeking stronger, more reliable assurances that suspects will not be tortured while in foreign custody.¹² Other actions reflect the Obama administration’s acceptance of Bush administration views on the global, borderless nature of counterterrorism. This is evident from comments made during the U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Attorney General Eric Holder and for U.S. Solicitor General Elena Kagan who both suggested that the terrorism “battlefield” extends to areas where individuals may be arrested for providing a range of support to terrorist groups.¹³

Additionally, while the Obama administration has halted the use of the most extreme interrogation tactics, his CIA Director Leon Panetta noted in his February 6, 2009 nomination testimony that “if we had a ticking-bomb situation, and obviously, whatever was being used I felt was not sufficient, I would not hesitate to go to the president of the United States and request whatever additional authority I would need.”¹⁴ The new administration has also continued—if not increased—Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) strikes, and is targeting the Pakistani Taliban, specifically the Baitullah Mehsud network.¹⁵ While this may arguably complicate counterinsurgency

12 This is considered by many to be either naïve or disingenuous given the realities of interrogation practiced by some of the United States’ more aggressive partners. For more, see Greg Miller, “Obama Preserves Renditions as Counter-Terrorism Tool,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2009.

13 Charlie Savage, “Obama’s War on Terror May Resemble Bush’s in Some Areas,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2009.

14 CIA Director Panetta did agree, however, that waterboarding constituted torture. For more, see Mark Mazzetti, “Pick for CIA Chief Leaves Open Idea of Harsher Interrogation,” *International Herald Tribune*, February 6, 2009.

15 Mark Mazzetti and David Sanger, “Obama Expands Missile Strikes Inside Pak,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2009.

efforts by inflaming public sentiment and generating additional recruits for Taliban-affiliated militias, the Predator strikes are one of the only tools at America's disposal for killing al-Qa`ida and Taliban leaders and operators who are attacking U.S., NATO, Afghan, and Pakistani targets.¹⁶

The Obama Administration's Early Moves

While the new administration's counterterrorism strategy is yet to be fully determined, the official White House webpage on homeland security provides the broad outlines of its approach to overseas radicalism and terrorism. The strategy pays particular attention to restoring widely-admired American values and standards that many allege were eroded during the last eight years of the unpopularly named "global war on terrorism." Five key points of the strategy¹⁷ are:

1. Find, Disrupt, and Destroy Al-Qa`ida;
2. New Capabilities to Aggressively Defeat Terrorists;
3. Prepare the Military to Meet 21st Century Threats;
4. Win the Battle of Ideas;
5. Restore American Influence and Restore Our Values.

Perhaps one of the most powerful and promising developments in counterterrorism is the direct challenge that Barack Obama's ascendancy to power and collaborative approach represents to al-Qa`ida's legitimacy. President Bush's controversial policies and public persona appeared to serve as an effective recruiting and propaganda tool for Usama bin Ladin and the extremists who rallied young Muslim men and women on his behalf. President Obama was immediately and crudely insulted by Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qa`ida's second-in-command, upon his election victory in November 2008. Al-Zawahiri called President-elect Obama a "house negro," suggesting that he would in fact be doing the bidding of a presumably racist, white America. This was a clear attempt to denigrate an individual whose personal

story undermines the penetrating and persistent al-Qa`ida narrative.

Indeed, the new U.S. president is an American minority who has risen to the highest seat of power. With a Kenyan father, a middle name of "Hussein," and a childhood education in Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim-majority country—President Obama shatters much of the negative imagery that some associate with executive leadership and power in the United States. His personal background, combined with the traditional influence enjoyed by the United States, serves to multiply the power and authority typically available to a U.S. president. In fact, a 17-nation poll conducted by the British Broadcasting Corporation on the eve of Barack Obama's inauguration showed "widespread and growing optimism that his presidency will lead to improved relations between the United States and the rest of the world," with 67% of poll respondents expressing positive views of the president-elect.¹⁸

This could mark a great opportunity to weaken al-Qa`ida's appeal. Just as *fatawa* by senior Muslim clerics around the world have questioned the legitimacy of al-Qa`ida's actions and reduced its standing among some Muslim populations, so too can Barack Obama's life story and worldwide admiration. Progress in reducing al-Qa`ida's appeal began while President Bush was in office, and President Obama can quickly build on that momentum. Pointing to the weaknesses and contradictions in al-Qa`ida's message, while dispensing with any self-defeating U.S. policies, will increase the chances of success by weakening Muslim support for al-Qa`ida. Furthermore, the bolstering of America's image and cancellation or modification of some controversial policies could certainly lead more countries to cooperate with the United States.¹⁹

Conclusion

A multitude of stresses are impacting vulnerable populations around the world, leaving many open to extremist

ideologies that energize marginalized people. It is clear that this trend will continue in the current economic climate.

There is an unmistakable tension between the West and Muslim and Arab worlds where a sense of humiliation and exploitation remains strong. One of the most important goals of U.S. foreign and counterterrorism policy will be to "communicate to the Muslim world that the U.S. is not at war with them," but rather is interested in greater partnership on many levels.²⁰ Achieving this goal will reduce the ability of al-Qa`ida and similar organizations to garner sympathy from Muslim populations, and thereby limit their capacity to recruit new members. There is now an effort to redesign U.S. policy, and by doing so the Obama administration can maintain a strong campaign against terrorism while avoiding mistakes that indirectly assist U.S. adversaries. This efficiency of policy is essential given the continued advantages of extremist groups and the worsening global environment that supports their arguments. It is likely that the United States and the world will see an ever more enhanced and sophisticated terrorist threat, and an equally refined approach to counterterrorism.

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16 "Kilcullen Weighs in on U.S. Strikes in Pakistan," *Weekly Standard*, February 10, 2009.

17 This information is drawn from the White House's Homeland Security Agenda, available at www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/homeland_security/.

18 "Global Poll Uncovers Growing Optimism that Obama Will Improve US Relations," BBC, January 20, 2009.

19 On the other hand, it could also cause some governments to refrain from providing intelligence to a new U.S. administration that is critical of harsh tactics.

20 Steve Simon and Daniel Byman et al., *Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008).