

Why Has the United States Not Been Attacked Again?

Asked shortly before leaving office to identify his “greatest accomplishment” as president, George W. Bush expressed his pride in “keeping America safe.”¹ Political commentator Peggy Noonan observed that the judgment “newly re-emerging as the final argument” for Bush’s presidency is that he succeeded in preventing another attack on the scale of September 11, 2001. Noonan suggested, however, that “It is unknown, and perhaps can’t be known, whether this was fully due to the government’s efforts, or the luck of the draw, or a combination of luck and effort.”²

The question of why the U.S. homeland has not been attacked again successfully has confounded policymakers and experts for more than seven years.³ Perhaps the most reassuring answer to the question is that U.S. and allied efforts have prevented further attacks. Several disrupted attacks seem to support this conclusion, among them the transatlantic airline plot of 2006, in which terrorists sought to bring down multiple passenger jets en route to the United States by using liquid explosives concealed in sports drinks. Yet, these reprieves concern only the handful of terrorists who have attempted to strike the United States since September 11. What of the operatives who have staged attacks in regions from Europe to Southeast Asia with regularity since then, or the foot soldiers who have been lured to the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq? What

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Have effective U.S. security policies kept the nation secure?

motivations, apprehensions, or directives have led them to strike outside the United States rather than within it?

Exploring the question of why the homeland has not been attacked again is not simply an academic exercise undertaken as part of history's appraisal of the Bush years. There are more practical interests at stake.

Identifying the factors that have contributed to the lull in homeland attacks, including the value of U.S. counterterrorism policies and the terrorists' responses to the changed security milieu, has direct implications for the way the Obama administration sets the course of the nation's counterterrorism strategy.

Exploring Four Competing Hypotheses

Speculation about the scale, mode, and timing of the next terrorist strike began almost immediately after the September 11 attacks had concluded. In May 2002, then-White House director of homeland security Tom Ridge offered what would become a familiar refrain when he declared, "It's not a question of if they will strike us again . . . it's a question of when."⁴ As the years passed, four different sets of explanations have emerged to explain the lack of attack with an emphasis on terrorist capabilities and terrorist motivations.

The first set of explanations is typified by Bush's argument on the fifth anniversary of September 11 when he stated that the absence of domestic attacks "is not for the lack of desire or determination on the part of the enemy."⁵ Instead, effective U.S. security policies have kept the nation secure. A closely related set of explanations argues that al Qaeda has not struck again because it lacks the capabilities to do so. By contrast, Osama bin Laden has scoffed at Bush's claim, taunting in 2006 that the delay in carrying out similar operations in the United States is not because of a failure to breach U.S. security measures: "Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing."⁶ A third set of explanations suggests that terrorists, and especially al Qaeda, have decided that another attack on the United States is ill-advised for the time being. The final set, pointing to continuing U.S. involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, argues that terrorists simply have other priorities than attacking the United States.

U.S. Counterterrorism and Homeland Security Policies

Since 2001, the United States has relentlessly hunted terrorists around the world, shut down training facilities, dried up sources of funding, disrupted active plots, and maintained constant pressure on terrorist networks. Al Qaeda operatives and leaders have reportedly been killed, captured, or reduced to

preserving their personal safety. Evidence also suggests that U.S. homeland security has improved since September 11. High value targets have been hardened; coordination between military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies has increased; and authorities at every level of government have heightened the scrutiny of suspicious behavior. By way of example, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials cite the case of Ra'ed Mansour al Banna as emblematic of the agency's growing effectiveness. Al Banna, a Jordanian national, was denied entry to the O'Hare airport in Chicago in July 2003 by a Customs and Border Protection officer. Less than two years later, he detonated a suicide bomb in Iraq, killing 132 people.⁷ Public vigilance has also played a role as citizens have reported behavior that was unremarkable before September 11. For example, in March 2003, Afghan-born U.S. resident Sayed Abdul Malike was arrested after informing an undercover Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent of his interest in purchasing enough plastic explosives "to blow up a mountain." Malike was already under scrutiny because he had asked a Miami tour boat captain how close a boat could get to local bridges.⁸

Though improved defenses have undoubtedly made the United States less hospitable to terrorists, significant weaknesses persist. Indeed, for all the emphasis on aviation security, loopholes have left the nation vulnerable to attacks that are virtually identical to September 11. In particular, security enhancements for general aviation flights have not corresponded to commercial aviation safeguards, leaving open the risk that a large private aircraft could be chartered by suicide hijackers who are subject to little, if any, security screening.⁹ Former DHS secretary Michael Chertoff has also expressed concern that "clean skin" operatives with no detectable extremist links could legally travel to the United States to carry out attacks.¹⁰ The United States' overseas counterterrorism track record is also mixed. Following the initial ousting of al Qaeda from Afghanistan, and despite the periodic killing of high value targets, the United States has had few dramatic successes. In the meantime, al Qaeda's senior leadership, though significantly disrupted by the loss of Afghanistan as its safe haven, managed to reestablish itself in the Pakistani tribal areas by 2007. This development in part led to an ominous intelligence community warning that the network had "protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability."¹¹

Terrorist Capabilities

While analyzing the second set of explanations—limited terrorist capabilities—it is important to distinguish between the capabilities of hierarchical groups in the mold of al Qaeda and their less capable "homegrown" acolytes. Gauging the capabilities of the former has been the natural analytic focus since September 11. More recently, forensic psychiatrist

Is al Qaeda no longer capable of striking the United States?

Marc Sageman has argued that the gravest terrorist threat comes not from large networks but from small clusters of self-activated groups.¹²

While the public may not be privy to many attacks that U.S. personnel may have thwarted since September 11, several

headline-grabbing terrorist operations have been notably lacking in sophistication. For instance, among the five “key terrorist plots” the White House cited as “counterterrorism victories” on the seventh anniversary of September 11 was a case involving four men who were charged with conspiring to explode fuel tanks beneath John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City.¹³ Announcing their arrest, Roslynn R. Mauskopf, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, described the conspiracy as “one of the most chilling plots imaginable,” which would have caused “just unthinkable” devastation. Officials later acknowledged that the cell had procured no explosives and the plot had never evolved beyond the planning phase.¹⁴ In turn, while Jose Padilla was arrested in what was called “an unfolding terrorist plot to attack the United States by exploding a radioactive ‘dirty bomb,’” the subsequent investigation revealed that the plot had never progressed beyond the conceptual phase. Padilla was ultimately not charged with plotting an attack.¹⁵

The portrait of incompetence these plots paint seems to lend credence to the limited capabilities explanation, buttressing the argument of one of its exponents, journalist Peter Bergen, who argues that “Leaderless organizations can’t mount spectacular operations such as 9/11, which required years of planning and training.”¹⁶ Yet, is this true? The truck bomb that Timothy McVeigh built (cheaply, discreetly, and with minimal assistance) was larger in explosive yield than the bomb Ramzi Yousef and Abdul Rahman Yasin constructed for their 1993 attack on the World Trade Center.¹⁷ Had Yousef and Yasin’s bomb been as powerful as McVeigh’s or, according to some analysts, positioned more expertly, the tower might indeed have collapsed, claiming many more victims than those that perished on September 11. While the Oklahoma City bombing caused federal buildings to be surrounded with vehicle barriers, many privately owned high-rises remain vulnerable to the sort of operation Yousef masterminded.¹⁸ If not terribly imaginative, this attack mode illustrates that small terrorist cells or even individuals may still be capable of horrific mass casualty attacks.

Further, even if untrained self-starters make poor terrorists, there exists a potentially large pool of more skilled operatives from which al Qaeda may still draw. Estimates of the number of militants who attended al Qaeda training facilities prior to September 11 range from 20,000 to 100,000, only a fraction of

whom can be assumed killed or captured since 2001. In this regard, Turkish militant Fevzi Yitiz, who was convicted for his role in the November 2003 Istanbul bombings, confessed that he had received instructions on how to create a bomb at an al Qaeda camp in 1994.¹⁹ The almost decade-long lull between Yitiz's training and his assistance in building the Istanbul truck bombs suggests that operatives can remain latent for years before taking action. Further, the possibility that aspiring local jihadists could receive technical assistance from affiliated terrorists—as appears to have been the case in the Madrid and London train bombings—might allow al Qaeda to achieve limited successes despite the apparent ineptitude of many sympathizers.

Whether more hierarchical organizations such as the al Qaeda core are capable of launching attacks against the United States remains the subject of considerable debate. In August 2008, Bergen argued that despite al Qaeda's recrudescence in Pakistan, it is "highly unlikely that the group will be able to attack inside the United States in the next five years."²⁰ The same month, Ted Gistaro, the national intelligence officer for transnational threats, warned that "In spite of successful U.S. and allied operations against al Qaeda . . . the group has maintained or strengthened key elements of its capability to attack the United States in the past year."²¹ The transatlantic airline plot of 2006 appears to have had the most genuine links between its conspirators and al Qaeda's core leaders in Pakistan.²² Many analysts have suggested this attack could have rivaled the death toll of September 11, and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official Bruce Riedel suggests the plot "came far nearer to success that [sic] most people recognize."²³ (This is despite the fact that while three of the eight suspects charged in the plot were convicted of conspiracy to commit murder, there was insufficient evidence to find them guilty of targeting aircraft. No verdict was reached for four of the men.)²⁴

In short, despite its losses, the al Qaeda network seems to have maintained a cohort of seasoned terrorists capable of supervising plots far from their base of operations. Further, having apparently bided its time for a truly spectacular attack, the group may have revealed a preference only for attacks that meet a certain threshold of destructiveness. Both factors call into question hypotheses suggesting that limited capabilities principally explain the lack of attacks on the U.S. homeland.

Terrorist Motivations: Do Not Attack the Homeland for Now

A very different line of explanation argues that al Qaeda is capable of conducting operations on U.S. soil but may have chosen not to do so for a variety of reasons. One such hypothesis that has gained currency among many experts is that al Qaeda's leaders have opted not to attack the United States again because they believe their next blow must equal or surpass the destruction caused on

Have terrorists decided that a U.S. homeland attack is ill-advised for the time being?

September 11. By setting the bar so high in 2001, any attack now deemed worthy of al Qaeda will likely require considerable time, resources, and manpower to execute. Although the “surpass 9/11” hypothesis is frequently cited, little evidence supports it. Instead, the theory is based more on the speculated trajectory of a historic trend line—the evolving sophistication of al Qaeda’s attacks from the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania to the

attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen in 2000 to the September 11 hijackings—than on direct evidence of current intentions.

Similarly, a number of theories focusing on terrorist motivations are intuitively persuasive but lack corroborating evidence. One argument suggests that al Qaeda is still “coasting” on September 11 and therefore has no reason to attack the United States at the moment. Regardless of the group’s audience—whether the American public, would-be jihadists, or the wider *umma* (global community of believers)—the attacks were sufficiently impressive to all of these groups to prevent their repetition in the foreseeable future. In turn, little purpose would be served by conducting another domestic attack until the effects of September 11—such as increased homeland security expenditures, public anxiety over terrorism, and overseas troop deployments—have ebbed.

Quite different is the contention that al Qaeda’s leaders have come to view September 11 as a strategic miscalculation that must not be repeated. According to Middle East scholar Fawaz A. Gerges, in private “former jihadis confide that they are furious with Al Qaeda, whose actions appear ‘senseless’ and ‘self-destructive,’ supplying ammunition to their tormentors—Muslim rulers—to strike harder against the Islamist movement.”²⁵ Nonetheless, speculation of September 11 as a miscalculation may incorrectly conflate al Qaeda’s original blunder with its leaders’ current thinking on the wisdom of attacking the United States. That is, while bin Laden may have miscalculated the effects of the attacks, it may not follow that his network is reluctant to strike the homeland again as a result of this misjudgment.

Terrorist Priorities: Attack Overseas Targets

The final category of explanations concerns a speculated shift in the targeting preferences of al Qaeda and other extremist groups. These hypotheses assume both a degree of domestic vulnerability and the capability of terrorists to attack the United States but posit that overseas targets have been more attractive since September 11. An obvious variant of this argument suggests that opportunities

to attack Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq diverted terrorist resources that might otherwise have been mobilized for homeland attacks. At least until quite recently, many jihadist recruits were being funneled into Iraq. But most of these recruits came from nearby Middle Eastern countries and may not have been qualified to conduct faraway attacks in an alien environment. Some are now said to be recruited in support of a resurgent Taliban. Mid-level leaders also were concentrating their efforts in Iraq, typified by Abu Musab al Zarqawi before his death. To the extent that these individuals were the “Mohammed Atta’s” of their terrorist cohort, these conflicts could have channeled essential talent away from the United States.

Other theories suggest that al Qaeda has returned its attention to other objectives in the Middle East. In December 2007, Ayman al Zawahiri solicited questions from jihadist sympathizers over the Internet. The following April, al Qaeda’s media arm released the first installment of his answers to the hundreds of questions that poured in. Many asked why the group had not struck Israel. According to an analysis of his responses by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, “Zawahiri’s increasingly heated rhetoric suggests an al-Qa’ida strike on Israel is increasingly likely, regardless of the fallout with HAMAS.”²⁶ In his 2001 manifesto, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, Zawahiri had written of the need to develop “slogans” that resonate with the “Muslim nation” and noted, “The one slogan that has been well understood by the nation and to which it has been responding for the past 50 years is the call for jihad against Israel.”²⁷

A different explanation, chiefly supported by the London and Madrid train bombings, is that al Qaeda has sought to penalize the United States’ European allies for their support of the Iraq invasion and thereby create a wedge in the transatlantic alliance. The increase in European terrorist activity since September 11, however, is not necessarily evidence of a deliberate shift in al Qaeda’s targeting preferences. It could instead be a reflection of the increased difficulty that European jihadists face in entering the United States and the greater convenience of conducting attacks closer to home. Moreover, these hypotheses that emphasize broad shifts in al Qaeda’s targeting preferences assume that the network’s capabilities are zero-sum—that is, al Qaeda cannot simultaneously plan and conduct large-scale operations against the U.S. homeland while also carrying out attacks in Europe or the Middle East—which is not necessarily true.

Many such theories of changed targeting preferences presuppose that the group’s senior leaders are able to communicate orders to followers and that their orders are obeyed. Yet, several factors suggest that the authority of al Qaeda’s “core” over its subordinate groups has diminished. Communications between al Qaeda’s Pakistan-based leaders and their supporters have likely become more difficult as a result of the geographical isolation of the leadership, their presumed

shifting of locations to avoid capture, and the elaborate security precautions they have adopted to prevent interception of their messages. Nonetheless, whether as a result of its senior leaders' inability to supervise attacks or a conscious decision to delegate targeting discretion, al Qaeda's decentralization appears to have given its sub-entities more autonomy in target selection. These networks may in turn have chosen to focus on their own objectives rather than attacking the United States.

Finally, it is necessary to consider non-Salafist groups that could potentially launch attacks against the homeland, including Hamas and Hezbollah. Both groups possess what their supporters consider a strong *prima facie* grievance against the United States for its support of Israel. In spite of these groups' hostility toward the United States, there is widespread agreement that this sentiment has not yet provided adequate motivation to conduct attacks on the United States' interests in the region, much less on U.S. territory. Their attack preferences lie elsewhere.

The Four Explanations: What's the Bottom Line?

To differing degrees, there is evidence both for and against each of the four categories of explanations—U.S. counterterrorism initiatives, limited terrorist capabilities, terrorist motivations, and alternative terrorist priorities. In some respects, the most defensible, if far from satisfying, answer to the question of why the United States has not been attacked again is: we simply do not know. Though significant unknowns about the efficacy of U.S. countermeasures and the capabilities, motivations, and priorities of U.S. adversaries persist, a number of judgments are warranted.

First, there is almost certainly no single explanation for why the United States has not been attacked again. Rather, the answer is found in some mix of factors, including actions that the United States and other countries have taken to disrupt al Qaeda and its allies as well as the motivations of the terrorists. Moreover, the motivations of different entities within the jihadist movement may well be as important as their capabilities.

Second, different explanations are likely more applicable at certain points in time than others. The overriding challenge for al Qaeda's leadership after the fall of the Taliban was to stay alive and avoid capture, with new attacks becoming a secondary consideration. The resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the reestablishment of al Qaeda safe havens in recent years have made this explanation considerably less persuasive. Concentrating efforts on Iraq to bleed the United States made sense as long as the war was going badly. After

the Anbar Awakening, the conflict in Iraq now offers a much less promising pathway to al Qaeda's goals.

Third, some explanations appear to carry more weight for different elements of the jihadist movement than others. A hypothesis may be persuasive in explaining the preferences of al Qaeda's senior leaders, who are sensitive to the network's strategic

objectives, while holding less value in explaining the actions of field operatives or unaffiliated jihadists, whose attacks may be more opportunistic. In particular, the very actions of cells that have carried out attacks in recent years—whether the Madrid and London train bombings or the aborted Glasgow attack—suggest their motivations were oriented not to attacks on the U.S. homeland but elsewhere. By contrast, for the al Qaeda leadership, some evolving mixture of the impact of U.S. counterterrorist actions and their own motivations may be more consequential. Still other groups, such as homegrown U.S. terrorists, appear either to lack the motivation to conduct major attacks (in the case of far-left and far-right extremists) or the opportunity (in the case of militants in the U.S. Muslim community, which as a whole has been far less sympathetic to radicalism than its European analogue.)

Fourth, at least for the cells that have been disclosed to be operating in the United States, their limited capabilities appear to have been an important contributing factor to their lack of success. For example, a New Jersey cell known as the Fort Dix Six came to the attention of authorities in 2006 when a video store clerk noticed bearded men shooting weapons and calling for jihad in a videotape submitted for conversion to DVD.²⁸ News reports have repeatedly painted a picture of these cells' poor planning, weak implementation, and overall greater aspirations than capabilities.

Fifth, success by al Qaeda's leadership in reconstituting a secure operational base in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border areas would dramatically undercut some of the more compelling explanations for the lack of another attack on the homeland. These include explanations that stress the impact of U.S. counterterrorist activities overseas (undercut by a new safe haven); the possibility that al Qaeda wishes to surpass September 11 (made more feasible with a safe haven that allows a greater ability to train, plan, and prepare, including to renew pursuit of biological if not nuclear weapons); a diversion of attention and energies to Iraq (replaced now by a new resurgence from a safe haven); the less hospitable U.S. environment due to the assimilation of Muslims in the United States (less important with a more robust external organization);

Have terrorists simply had other priorities than attacking the United States?

There is reason for concern that the likelihood of another major attack may be increasing.

and the reluctance to attack again out of a belief that the September 11 attack was a miscalculation (a view now conceivably seen as only a temporary setback if there is success in reestablishing a safe haven). As a result, the continued absence of a successful attack, even if a secure base is reestablished, would need to be ascribed to still other explanations, especially those focused on U.S. counterterrorist actions as well as limited

terrorist capabilities. The argument that al Qaeda is focusing its attention exclusively on Europe would also gain credibility.

Sixth, there is reason for concern that the likelihood of another major attack may be increasing. The thwarted transatlantic plot of 2006 discussed earlier suggests a continued interest in a major attack on American citizens and that any period of “coasting” on September 11 may well have ended. Moreover—and perhaps paradoxically—the growing success of U.S. efforts in Iraq has made that country a less attractive theater of operations for jihadists. Iraq also no longer provides as promising a venue for “bleeding” the United States. By contrast, if bin Laden’s path to success is to “bleed” the United States, now may be the most propitious time for an attack on U.S. territory, given the continuing economic turmoil. Not least, the success of al Qaeda and the Taliban in reconsolidating their position in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border areas would undercut several compelling explanations for the lack of a successful attack. Concern about that growing danger was an important driver of the recently announced U.S. strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan. That revised strategy calls for deployments of additional U.S. troops, both for combat operations and to help train the Afghan army and police; expanded actions to help restore a stable economic, political, and security situation in Pakistan as well as to enable Pakistan to counter terrorists within; deployment of new civilian advisors to help the Afghan people as well as intensified efforts aimed at governmental reform; efforts at reconciliation with Taliban fighters and supporters; and pursuit of additional international support.²⁹

Finally, in contrast to the continued uncertainty about how to explain al Qaeda’s failure to attack the U.S. homeland again, lack of motivation does appear to provide a compelling explanation for the lack of operations by non-Salafist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as well as by homegrown extremists and “lone wolf” terrorists. This, however, could change either because of the unpredictable psychology of the next McVeigh or a change in regional dynamics within the Middle East.

Implications for U.S. Policies and Actions

U.S. policymakers' recognition of their limited understanding of al Qaeda and the wider jihadist movement is the starting point for thinking about the counterterrorism implications of the preceding discussion. Three broad implications stand out:

The Need for Better Understanding of Terrorist Adversaries

More than seven years after the September 11 attacks, U.S. policymakers still require a more complete grasp of what al Qaeda hoped to achieve with its original attack and how its objectives have shifted in the interim. Explanations range from bin Laden's putative desire to rally the *umma* around the banner of global jihad, through drawing the United States into a quagmire on "Muslim soil," to so terrorizing U.S. residents that the U.S. government would capitulate to al Qaeda's policy demands. Though a seemingly self-evident challenge, the Obama administration should redouble U.S. efforts to understand how al Qaeda's leaders perceive tactical operations as contributing to the group's long-term objectives.

In addition, while acknowledging al Qaeda to be the most serious threat, U.S. intelligence collection and analysis should not concentrate exclusively on al Qaeda. Several non-Salafist groups represent a potential threat that has been largely discounted as a result of their traditionally regional and nationalist objectives. Though these groups currently appear to lack the motivation to attack the United States at home or abroad, those motivations could change in response to developments in the Middle East. Thus, U.S. analytic and intelligence efforts need to strike a delicate balance: continuing to focus on al Qaeda and other radical Salafists while hedging against the threat from primarily regional organizations whose objectives and ideology can unexpectedly evolve.

The Need for Influence Strategies

Until quite recently, efforts aimed at influencing or shaping terrorists' decisions to attack the United States—in effect, to practice deterrence—were frequently rejected out of hand. The standard argument was that terrorists simply could not be deterred. Yet, the lack of an attack seems to point to the role of motivations. As such, U.S. policymakers should study ways to influence those motivations. Specifically, greater attention should be paid to identifying potential leverage points that may be exploited to shape the decisions made by core al Qaeda leaders and inspired jihadists about whether to invest their energies in attacking the United States. One key factor appears to be al Qaeda's relationship with the global Muslim *umma* and whether this constituency views the group's operations favorably or unfavorably. Evidence suggests that senior al Qaeda leaders are

sensitive to the Muslim world's reaction to killing civilians. The perception of the group's actions by other radical Islamists in particular has been seen to influence al Qaeda's "public relations" efforts. When Zawahiri's former radical colleague Sayed Imam al Sharif (a.k.a. Dr. Fadl) publicly criticized al Qaeda's methods—asking, "What good is it if you kill one of his people, and he kills a thousand of yours?"—Zawahiri was forced to issue a lengthy exculpatory rebuttal.³⁰ In "The Exoneration," Zawahiri admits that the jihad has not been "free of error" but defends attacks that kill fellow Muslims. He argues, "If a Muslim never attacks the enemy for fear of killing fellow believers or innocent people, how can he put pressure on a much more powerful enemy?"³¹

In addition, efforts to enhance U.S. resiliency to terrorist attacks also could influence terrorists' calculations about whether to attack the U.S. homeland or concentrate their efforts elsewhere. Still another target of such deterrence efforts would be the potential aiders and abettors of a terrorist attack such as states, individuals, and organizations that could provide inputs crucial to success or failure in the case of biological or nuclear terrorism. The Obama administration, therefore, should carry on the Bush administration's readiness to hold such aiders and abettors accountable.

The Need for Broad Spectrum Strategies

Given the lack of one overriding explanation for the absence of another attack on the homeland, it is also important to pursue strategies whose payoffs would not be linked to any single answer to this question. Instead, these initiatives should enhance U.S. defenses across a broad spectrum of efforts to check terrorist capabilities, influence possible motivations, and counter operational practices. Five "broad spectrum" strategies call for attention:

First, continued efforts are needed to strengthen cooperation at home. Since September 11 there has been a considerable effort to develop plans, procedures, and training to respond to another attack at all levels of government. This process should not be allowed to fade as memories of September 11 diminish and economic difficulties come to dominate the domestic political agenda. Furthermore, it is important to continue with strengthening the National Response Framework under DHS, which establishes a comprehensive all-hazards approach to a domestic incident at the national level.³² To that end, it is important to develop a full set of National Response Plans to cover the spectrum of possible terrorist attacks. Doing so will not only help to strengthen management capabilities at the national, state, and local levels in the event of a major terrorist attack, regardless of its mode, but if emphasized publicly could also enhance deterrence.

Second, investments are needed to strengthen U.S. resiliency to a terrorist attack, especially one involving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The goal

of such efforts would be to contain panic, avert economic paralysis, and head off possible public or policy overreaction in the wake of an attack. The importance of societal resiliency is now well recognized, but there is less agreement on how to strengthen it. At one level, societal resiliency will be closely linked to the effectiveness of official responses at all levels to any future attack, and especially

U.S. policymakers must recognize their limited understanding of al Qaeda and the wider jihadist movement.

to the public's perception of governmental competence even in the face of a large-scale attack. Continued consequence management preparations are thus critical. In addition, official statements need to be balanced, articulating the persistence of the terrorist threat in the early twenty-first century while avoiding counterproductive alarmism. Specific discussion of the motivations and objectives of a group such as al Qaeda could help avoid responses to attacks that would conform to the terrorists' wishes, not least a public search for scapegoats among the American Muslim community. Finally, there may be lessons to be learned to enhance American public resiliency by looking at other countries' experiences, such as the British experience with Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombings as well as the Israeli experience with Palestinian terror attacks. In Israel, for example, authorities work to return bombing scenes to normal as quickly as possible in an effort to minimize the psychological impact of the attack.³³

Third, decisionmakers need to remain mindful of the potential unintended consequences of the nation's responses to the terrorist threat. At home, it is important that U.S. policies do not unintentionally reverse the steady assimilation of Muslims into American mainstream society. Recognizing the danger of unintended consequences may also help policymakers avoid costly responses overseas in the aftermath of the next attack. Here the greatest challenge may be balancing aggressive use of military means to strike al Qaeda in its new safe havens and the danger of alienating the Islamic community in Pakistan and beyond by inflicting civilian casualties.

Fourth, strengthening international cooperation remains essential to reducing terrorist capabilities and disrupting plots as well as understanding terrorists' motivations and seeking to influence them. Successful cooperative efforts that are already in place need to be carried forward promptly without long and enervating policy reviews, regardless of the development of any new policies. A good example is the U.S.–Russian Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, which brings together expertise on nonproliferation and counterterrorism, integrates collective capabilities aimed at combating nuclear

Five “broad spectrum” counterterrorism strategies stand out.

terrorism, and provides a forum to share information. Any new policy developed by the Obama administration toward Russia should not affect this initiative. There are also several opportunities for new alliances. A great deal can be done with other partners to accelerate implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540, which obligates states to enact mechanisms to impede terrorist access to WMD.³⁴ Equally important, further international norm-building actions should be pursued to provide a political and legal foundation for counterterrorism cooperation such as encouraging universal adherence to the new International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism.

Finally, as already suggested, the United States needs to get Afghanistan and Iraq right. While it is simplistic to explain the lack of an attack since September 11 by pointing to operations in these countries, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that these conflicts will likely have profound effects on the homeland security landscape. Prospects have dramatically increased for a relatively successful outcome in Iraq. Yet, according to the judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate *Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States*, the increased role of native Iraqis in leading al Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq may persuade veteran jihadists to direct their energies outside of Iraq. Preventing these fighters from forming a leadership cadre for Sunni extremist groups around the world will take on even greater priority as the Iraq conflict winds down.³⁵ There is growing concern about the conflict in Afghanistan and a possible Taliban-al Qaeda resurgence. Such an outcome would likely bring with it all the dangers of a reestablished base of operations for the United States’ adversaries comparable to the situation prior to September 11.

The Obama Administration’s Start

The Obama administration already has made dramatic changes in U.S. counterterrorism tactics and strategy, respectively announcing its intention to close the Guantánamo detention center within one year and setting out a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The purpose of the former is to bring U.S. counterterrorism tactics into better harmony with U.S. values, while the purpose of the latter is to head off the grave danger posed by a successful reemergence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. As it continues to revise U.S. policies, the administration will need to ensure sufficient funding for

counterterrorist operations even while meeting the demands of revival and reform of the U.S. economy. Nearly eight years after the September 11 attacks, maintaining broad public support for government efforts to counter the terrorist threat will remain a crucial challenge. Just as assuredly, preventing the next attack by al Qaeda—or by a network that is perhaps not yet formed—will require an understanding that our enemies do not operate according to a timetable or set of objectives that can easily be comprehended. Acknowledging what we know and what we do not know, and crafting our policies accordingly, is an essential foundation for preventing the next September 11.

Notes

1. "Transcript: Charlie Gibson Interviews President Bush," ABCNews.com, December 1, 2008, p. 5, <http://www.abcnews.go.com/WN/Politics/story?id=6356046&page=1>.
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