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How to Deter Terrorism

For more than 50 years during the Cold War, deterrence was a cornerstone of U.S. strategy. The United States aimed to prevent the Soviet Union from attacking the West by threatening to retaliate with a devastating nuclear response. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, many observers argued that deterrence was irrelevant to the U.S.-led war on terror. Analysts claimed that unlike the Soviet Union's leadership, terrorists were irrational, willing to incur any cost (including death) to achieve their goals, and would be difficult to locate following an attack. For these reasons and others, it was thought that threats to retaliate against terrorists would be inherently incredible and insufficient to deter terrorist action.

These early views shaped the U.S. government's initial strategy to address the terrorist threat. President George W. Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy, released roughly one year after 9/11, stated that "Traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents; whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death and whose most potent protection is statelessness."[1]

Shortly thereafter, however, policymakers began to think more seriously about the ability to deter terrorists. While working in the Office of the Secretary of Defense in 2005, we were the principal authors of the first-ever U.S. government-wide strategy for deterring terrorist networks. As Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker write in their 2011 book *Counterstrike*, "Kroenig and Pavel crafted a briefing to make the case that a combination of efforts—economic, diplomatic, military, political, and psychological . . . could in fact establish a new strategy and create a new and effective posture of deterrence against terrorist

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groups."[2] The strategy fed into the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which announced the Pentagon's intentions to shift "from a 'one size fits all' deterrence— to tailored deterrence for rogue powers, terrorist networks, and near-peer competitors."[3] According to the review, the Department of Defense must design its future forces to "provide a fully balanced, tailored capability to deter both state and non-state threats—including…terrorist attacks in the physical and informational domains."[4] Schmitt and Shanker continued, "A half decade after [Kroenig and Pavel's] proposal had been handed to President Bush at his Texas ranch by Donald Rumsfeld, their initiatives had been disseminated throughout the national security apparatus and embraced by like-minded thinkers across the military, intelligence, diplomatic, and law enforcement communities."[5]

While we are flattered by the book's portrayal of our work, it risks overstating our influence. The deterrence approach remains a poorly understood and underutilized element of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. It holds, however, great potential for helping to thwart future terrorist attacks.

This article presents the first publicly available articulation of this strategy. We argue that, unlike in state-to-state deterrence, deterrence against terrorism can only be partially successful, and that it will always be a component—and never a cornerstone—of national policy. Nevertheless, as long as states can deter some terrorists from engaging in certain types of terrorist activity, deterrence should be an essential element of a broader counterterrorism strategy.

Conceptualizing Deterrence against Terrorism

Deterrence is a strategic interaction in which an actor prevents an adversary from taking an action that the adversary otherwise would have taken by convincing the adversary that the cost of taking that action will outweigh any potential gains. To achieve deterrence, therefore, an actor can shape the adversary's perception of the costs or benefits of a particular course of action. Cost imposition (also known as deterrence-by-retaliation, or deterrence-by-punishment) strategies seek to achieve deterrence by threatening to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary if the adversary takes a particular course of action. During the Cold War, for example, the United States attempted to deter

Moscow from invading Western Europe by threatening to respond with a massive nuclear attack.

When considering deterrence, many analysts think solely in terms of deterrence-by-retaliation, but deterrence theorists also advanced a second type of deterrence strategy: benefit denial, or deterrence-by-denial, strategies which contribute to deterrence by threatening

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to deny an adversary the benefits of a particular course of action. Whereas cost imposition strategies threaten retaliation, benefit denial strategies threaten failure. If actors believe that they are unlikely to succeed or reap significant benefits from a certain course of action, they may be deterred from taking it. For example, in the nuclear realm, missile defenses are sometimes thought to contribute to deterrence by convincing the adversary that only a fraction of its nuclear warheads would reach their designated target, reducing the benefits of launching a nuclear strike. Indeed, according to Professor Glenn Snyder, a denial strategy may even "be the more powerful deterrent" because threats to attempt to deny an attack are inherently more credible than threats to retaliate in response to an attack.[6]

Deterrence is distinct from other strategies such as defense. There is a fine line between deterrence-by-denial and defense because defensive postures can have deterrent effects and deterrent capabilities can aid in a defensive operation. To distinguish between these approaches, we follow previous scholarship in defining defensive policies as those that are designed primarily to fend off an opponent in the event of an attack, and deterrence policies as those that are intended to convince an adversary not to attack in the first place. Though this distinction may seem academic, it contains important policy implications that are elaborated below.

Deterrence: Then and Now

There are a number of key differences, three of which are highlighted here, between our understanding of deterrence as it developed during the Cold War and as it applies to the war on terror. First, there are many more adversaries to be deterred in the war on terror. In the Cold War, U.S. deterrence policy aimed to influence the decisionmaking of a single key adversary, the Soviet Union. As long as U.S. leaders had a sufficient understanding of the policymaking process in the Kremlin, they could hope to design policies that could consistently deter Moscow. In the war on terror, in contrast, the United States faces a variety of adversaries in the form of different terrorist networks and, within each terrorist network, numerous individuals and groups which

Cost imposition strategies threaten retaliation; benefit denial strategies threaten failure.

possess independent decisionmaking authority and an ability to harm U.S. interests. It is much more difficult, therefore, for U.S. foreign policymakers to accurately understand each adversary and design policies to consistently deter all terrorism.

Second, and related, deterrence used to be absolute, but now it is partial. If Cold War deterrent threats had been unsuccessful and the Soviet Union had launched an invasion of Western Europe, or a massive nuclear attack, U.S. interests, including perhaps its very existence, would have been gravely threatened. In contrast, deterrence against terrorism can only be partial at best. The United States cannot deter all terrorist activity, but as long as Washington can deter certain types of terrorists from engaging in certain types of terrorist activity, deterrence can contribute to national security goals.

This leads to the third point: during the Cold War, deterrence was a key pillar of U.S. strategy against the Soviet Union, but in the war on terror it should be only one element of a broader strategy. A comprehensive strategy requires offensive operations to attack and disrupt terrorist networks, defenses to protect the homeland, and efforts to counter ideological support for terrorism. Nevertheless, deterrence directly contributes to these other goals and, as we will see below, is a necessary component of an effective counterterrorism strategy.

Deconstructing Terrorist Networks

To devise an appropriate deterrence strategy against terrorists, it is necessary to disaggregate a terrorist network into its component parts. Although many observers think of terrorists solely as the foot soldiers who conduct attacks, there are many other actors in a terrorist network: radical clerics preach incendiary sermons that incite violence, financiers fund terrorist operations, and leaders give orders to carry out attacks. Deterring these actions, therefore, can be as important as directly preventing attacks themselves. A comprehensive counterterrorism strategy aims to disrupt and deter activities in all of the key parts of a terrorist network.

Disaggregating a terrorist network into its component parts can illuminate how terrorists in different functional roles calculate costs and benefits. First, individuals may select into roles based on their preferences. For example, a person who sympathizes with a terrorist movement, but highly values his or her own life, may be less likely to volunteer as a suicide bomber and more likely to provide financing or other support. Moreover, the role that an individual plays in a terrorist network can, over time, shape his or her preferences. For example,

leaders may place greater value on their own lives as they come to believe that their survival is critical to sustaining the terrorist movement. With this type of knowledge, the United States can better tailor its deterrence strategies. For example, retaliatory threats might be more effective against those actors in a terrorist network who value their lives and property, such as leaders, financiers, and clerics, whereas denial strategies will be relatively more important against other types of actors, such as foot soldiers.

Strategies for Deterring Terrorism

This section presents four strategies that the United States can use to deter terrorism (see Table: A Deterrence Toolkit). It begins with a discussion of cost imposition strategies (direct response and indirect response). These strategies aim to deter terrorist behavior through the threat of costly retaliation. The section then continues to consider tactical and strategic benefit denial strategies. These strategies seek to deter terrorism by threatening failure.

Direct Response

Direct response strategies are those that aim to deter an adversary by threatening to retaliate against the adversary for taking hostile action. This type of strategy is probably the most widely understood form of deterrence. These strategies also are sometimes referred to as "retaliation" or "punishment" strategies. While it may be true that it is difficult to deter suicide bombers with retaliatory threats, not all members of a terrorist network are suicide bombers. Many terrorist leaders, financiers, supporters, radical clerics, and other members of terrorist

Table: A Deterrence Toolkit

	Impose Costs	Deny Benefits
Direct approach	**Direct response:** Threaten to respond against violent extremists. e.g., threaten to imprison radical clerics who incite violence	**Denial—tactical level:** Threaten to deny tactical success. e.g., visibly strengthen homeland security
Indirect approach	**Indirect response:** Threaten to respond against assets valued by violent extremists. e.g., threaten to impose costs (travel restrictions, taxes, etc.) on terrorists' families	**Denial—strategic level:** Threaten to deny strategic success. e.g., communicate that demands for withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Middle East will not be met, even in the face of terrorist attacks.

networks value their lives and possessions. Simple threats of imprisonment and death against these actors can deter terrorist activity.

For example, the United Kingdom has shown that threatening imprisonment can deter radical clerics from preaching incendiary sermons. Before 2005, a number of clerics presided over large congregations in mosques in London and openly advocated terrorism against Western powers. Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed preached that Muslims will give the West "a 9/11 day, after day, after day" unless Western governments change their policies in the Middle East.[7] These clerics also lived comfortable lives, making them vulnerable to cost imposition strategies. Many lived in stately manors in upscale London neighborhoods and could sometimes be seen on weekends with their families, carrying large shopping bags from fashionable department stores.[8] After the July 2005 terrorist bombings in London, Tony Blair announced his intention to pass legislation that would ban the "glorification of terrorism."[9] The law, passed in March 2006, had an immediate effect. Rather than face prosecution at the hands of British authorities, prominent clerics left the United Kingdom for other countries, or changed their tune nearly overnight, renouncing previous calls to incite violence and speaking out against terrorism.[10] While Britain's "glorification" law raises difficult civil liberty issues (many critics describe it as a partial ban on free speech), it also demonstrates that radical clerics can be deterred from preaching incendiary sermons by threatening imprisonment.

Furthermore, other members of a terrorist organization's support network also can be deterred by simple threats of retaliation. According to a 9/11 Commission Staff Report, for example, the Saudi government's enhanced scrutiny of donors after 9/11 appears to have deterred some terrorist financing.[11]

The lesson for counterterrorism is clear: the simple threat to punish individuals engaging in terrorist activity can have a significant deterrent effect. The United States should, therefore, do more to work with friends and allies to put laws on the books (where they do not already exist) to punish terror activity, develop capabilities and partnerships to increase the probability that those participating in terrorism are identified, and work to make sure that terrorists—whether operating on the battlefields of Afghanistan or the streets of London—receive appropriate punishment. Sometimes, this could mean a prison sentence; others, a Predator drone strike.

Moreover, terrorist organizations themselves might also be deterred by the threat of retaliation. While it has become cliché to point out that terrorists lack a return address, many successful organizations actually depend heavily on a safe haven from which to operate. Hamas controls Gaza, Hezbollah has Lebanon, and before 9/11 al-Qaeda was extended a safe haven in Afghanistan. To the degree that a state can threaten to revoke an important safe haven, terrorist leaders may be deterred. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, for

example, may have been deterred from cooperating with Jemaah Islamiyah and al-Qaeda by the threat of U.S. retaliation.[12]

Finally, and most obviously, state sponsors of terrorism are also vulnerable to direct response strategies.[13] President Bush's threat after 9/11 that the United States would not distinguish between terrorists and states that sponsor them encouraged many states to reconsider their traditional ties with non-state militant groups.[14] The United States issued another round of threats beginning in 2005, vowing to hold states fully accountable if they provided terrorists with materials that were used in a nuclear attack.[15] This type of threat, if made credible with effective nuclear attribution techniques, could deter states from transferring nuclear weapons or materials to terrorist organizations.[16]

There are, of course, a number of potential limitations to a direct response strategy. First, the so-called "hard core" of terrorist networks, including suicide bombers, may not be deterred by threats of direct retaliation. For this type of terrorist, denial strategies will likely prove more useful. A second limitation results from an inevitable tension between deterrence and warfare. In order to be successful, a direct-response deterrent threat must be made conditional on an adversary's behavior. If individuals and political groups believe that they will be targeted as part of the U.S. war on terror regardless of their actions, they will have less incentive to show restraint. Washington, therefore, must complement its deterrence policies with policies of reassurance. Officials must make a firm commitment to those who refrain from terrorist activity that they will not be punished.[17]

Indirect Response

Indirect response strategies are those that deter by threatening to retaliate, not against terrorists themselves, but against something else that terrorists hold dear. While it is sometimes difficult to retaliate against specific terrorists, states may be able to threaten (or convince terrorists that their own actions might harm) other things they value such as their families, assets, and communities.

An example of an indirect response strategy is Israel's past policy of demolishing the homes of suicide bombers' families. Israel could not threaten to punish suicide bombers themselves because they were dead after a successful attack, but it did retaliate against their families. This policy forced would-be suicide bombers to trade off the benefits of personal glory and martyrdom against the cost of homelessness for their immediate families. Israel has subsequently abandoned this counterterrorism approach, but there is evidence to suggest that it deterred many suicide bombings.[18]

Although indirect response strategies, as they have been conceived so far, have proven impracticable because of their severity, there may be other, more subtle methods that states could consider. States could impose taxes or travel

restrictions on terrorists' families, for example. While less severe than home demolitions, these penalties might still influence a terrorist's cost/benefit calculus. Such an approach, however, also has its problems. Legal systems in many countries are predicated on the notion of individual responsibility, placing collective punishment (i.e., against a terrorist's family or community) strategies on shaky legal footing.

Alternatively, states may be able to employ strategies that aim merely to shape terrorists' perceptions about how terrorist activity could negatively affect their families and communities. For example, Professor Thomas Schelling has argued that radical Islamic terrorists may be deterred from conducting a biological attack if they become convinced that the outbreak of a communicable disease in the West, given the interconnectedness of the modern world, could make its way back to, and kill many Muslims in, the Middle East.[19]

While indirect response strategies may have deterred terrorism in the past, they may be, at present, the least attractive approach for deterring most terrorists. Nevertheless, thinking about indirect response strategies, with all of their attendant shortcomings, may provide insight into other more workable strategies in the future.

Tactical Denial

Tactical denial strategies are those that, simply put, threaten failure at the tactical level. They deter terrorism by threatening to deny terrorists the ability to successfully conduct an attack. If terrorists believe that an attack is likely to fail, they will be less motivated to waste time and resources by attempting to carry it out. In contrast, strategic denial strategies, which will be discussed below, seek to deny terrorists the benefits of a successful attack. But tactical denial targets the success of the attack itself.

> A thwarted attack can demoralize and weaken the terrorist movement.

We know that terrorist leaders and foot soldiers highly value operational success, but for different reasons. Leaders view successful attacks, in part, as the best means for generating attention, new funds, and new recruits to the terrorist network. A thwarted attack, on the other hand, can have the opposite effect, demoralizing and weakening the terrorist movement. As Osama bin Laden himself argued, "When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse."[20] Foot soldiers also value operational success: suicide bombers do not want to risk their martyrdom and glory on a botched operation. Moreover, foot soldiers appear not only to worry about whether their attack will be successful,

but also about *how* successful the attack will be. For example, before going on a suicide mission, a young Iraqi said that he hoped he would be able to kill enough Americans.[21] In his mind, his martyrdom could be jeopardized if his attack only killed a handful of soldiers.

Given the value that terrorists place on operational success, states can deter terrorism by convincing terrorists that operations are likely to fail. For this reason, simple homeland security measures can deter terrorist attacks. Improving domestic intelligence and hardening key targets are strong deterrents to attack. Indeed, we know of many cases in which terrorists were deterred from carrying out an attack by the fear of failure. For example, an al-Qaeda affiliate planned to attack a U.S. military base in Turkey in late 2003, but the United States improved its defenses at the site during the planning stages, and the terrorists called off the attack.[22]

It is, of course, impossible to protect every conceivable target, and terrorists will often re-focus away from hardened targets toward softer ones. This fact can be an asset as well as a liability in the war on terror, however. It is, after all, the counterterrorists' choice about which targets should be defended and at what cost.

Deploying effective homeland security measures may, for example, be targeted to specifically help deter WMD terrorism. In order to successfully conduct a WMD attack, terrorists would have to complete a number of difficult steps. Measures that the United States takes to reduce the probability that a WMD terror attack will succeed should have a deterrent effect. For example, as the United States improves its radiation detection capabilities at border crossings, the probability that a terrorist smuggling nuclear material across the border will be captured and the radioactive material confiscated increases. Given the value that terrorists might place on scarce and strategically important nuclear material, they may prefer not to even attempt to bring it into the United States, given a sufficiently high risk of losing it.

A critic might counter that the United States is already improving homeland security and that this is being done for defensive, not deterrent purposes. This critique, however, glosses over one of the most important questions of U.S. counterterrorism policy: should homeland security measures be intended primarily as a deterrent or as a defense? We argue that homeland security policy should be designed primarily as a deterrent. The objective of homeland security should not be to fend off an endless number and methods of terrorist attacks. In fact, if it gets to the point that U.S. forces have to thwart an attack at the last moment, homeland security has failed. Rather, the United States should aim to *deter* terrorism. Washington should send the message that we are ready and that it is not in terrorists' best interests to attempt an attack. The point of building concrete barriers around the Washington Monument is not to have

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terrorists smash explosive-laden trucks into the barricades day after day. Rather, the hope is that terrorists will see the defenses and decide not to attack in the first place.

This insight has important implications for the way we structure homeland security. First, homeland security should not be designed primarily as a defense. We cannot hope to thwart every kind of conceivable attack. Rather the goal should be to raise the perceived probability that an operation will be thwarted to convince terrorists that they should not attempt an attack in the first place. For this goal, a perfect defense is overkill (and unachievable in any event). Homeland security can rely more heavily on measures such as randomized screening and periodic surges in security levels at key sites. Such measures keep terrorists off guard, are less costly than a watertight defense, and if designed well, are sufficient for deterring terrorist attacks.

In addition, apart from its objective level of defenses, the United States can take measures to shape terrorists' *subjective* perceptions of its counterterror capabilities. Deterrence is a psychological relationship. If terrorists believe that Washington could thwart an attack, terrorists can be deterred whether or not Washington actually has the ability to do so. Therefore, states should adopt strategic communications policies to convince terrorists that attacks are likely to fail. The United States can, for example, publicize the extensiveness and depth of its homeland security measures. Perhaps, more importantly, the United States should put aside excessive concerns with secrecy and become more willing to publicize foiled attacks. Broadcasting examples of the terrorists who fail could encourage potential terrorists to reassess the likelihood that their own plot will succeed.

States may also be able to achieve deterrent effects by developing and publicizing their resilience, including through adequate disaster planning and emergency response systems. If terrorists believe that the United States has a robust system in place for mitigating the consequences of a radiological attack, for example, terrorists may be deterred from attempting it.

The United States has already issued some direct denial threats. For example, following the 9/11 attacks, the United States announced that it will shoot down hijacked airplanes.[23] If terrorists believe that the United States will destroy hijacked airplanes before they can reach their intended target, there is little remaining incentive for them to do so for use as missiles. The new U.S. policy might already have deterred 9/11-style attacks. Following the announcement, terrorists have attempted to detonate planes in midair, such as the failed

underwear bomber plot in 2009, rather than crash them into U.S. cities.[24] From Washington's perspective, this substitution is an improvement because the damage of a downed airplane should be less than the destruction caused by a deliberate airplane crash in a major metropolitan area.

In sum, states can deter terrorism by threatening failure at the tactical level. If terrorists fear that an attack will fail, they will be deterred from attempting it. For this reason, Washington should design homeland security policy with deterrence, and not just defense, in mind. This could offer the same levels of protection at a fraction of the cost to the U.S. economy and way of life.

Strategic Denial

Strategic denial policies deter terrorism by threatening to deny terrorists strategic benefits, even in the face of successful terrorist attacks. In this way, strategic denial strategies seek to break the perceived link between successful terrorist operations and the goals they intended to serve. Terrorists may be deterred from attacking if they believe that even a string of highly successful attacks will not help them achieve those broader political goals.

A strategy of systematically denying terrorists' strategic objectives begins with identifying those objectives. Many terrorist organizations share a basic strategy: terrorists attack civilian targets to terrorize the population protected by that government. Terrorists hope that the terrorized populace will then pressure the government to take action to stop the mayhem. Finally, terrorists hope that, in response to popular pressure, governments will concede to the terrorists' political demands in exchange for a cessation of violence.

States can deter terrorism by identifying and denying, rather than ceding, the objectives sought in the terror strategy. For example, some countries have learned to limit media coverage of terror attacks to reduce the publicity sought by terrorist organizations. Simply limiting coverage of terrorist attacks can reduce the publicity benefits sought by those organizations. For example, following the terrorist attacks on a resort in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in the summer of 2005, Egyptian authorities draped a giant white sheet over the damaged hotel.[25] When television crews arrived to get footage of a gaping, smoking hole in the side of the building, what they got instead was a blank white screen. Similarly, the Israeli government has established a voluntary private–public partnership with the Israeli media. Media organizations in Israel agree to limit the amount of coverage they devote to each terrorist attack, attempting to balance the public's right to know with the government's efforts to combat terrorism.

States also can deter terrorism by denying terrorists the ability to cause panic in society. If terrorists are less able to sow chaos in a society, they will be less able to leverage that panic into political concessions. Israel, for example, attempts to

quickly reopen bombed cafes in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. The ability to bounce back quickly—in a word, resilience—signals to the population and to terrorist groups that terrorist attacks will not disrupt daily life.

Some terrorists might be driven more by ideological goals than by politics. Still, even these individuals could be deterred if the United States can deny them these nonmaterial objectives. For example, Washington can continue working with mainstream Muslim clerics to point out that suicide is contrary to Islamic teachings. If individuals increasingly doubt whether a suicide mission will lead to personal salvation, they may calculate that the costs of terrorist activity outweigh the benefits. Denying nonmaterial objectives may be difficult, of course, and visible U.S. interference in debates about Muslim theology, for example, should be avoided. Nevertheless, if done well, such efforts could deter terrorism.

Radical Muslim terrorist operations also use terrorism as a method of winning the support of the broader Muslim community, or the *Ummah*. If terrorists can be persuaded, however, that certain activities are likely to undermine their support within the *Ummah*, they could be deterred. In July 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the second in command of al-Qaeda, sent a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, asking him to stop killing Muslims and beheading captured prisoners because it was provoking a backlash in the Muslim world.[26] U.S. efforts to carefully publicize the shameful acts of terrorists through intermediaries could help deter certain types of terrorist activity.

Perhaps most importantly, however, states can deter terrorism by steadfastly refusing to grant terrorist organizations their ultimate political demands. If non-state groups come to believe that a terror-based strategy will not help them to achieve their fundamental political goals, over time they may be deterred from choosing terrorism as a tactic. It may be for this reason that many states have adopted an official policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists. The policy is not wholly driven by moral considerations, but rather by a strategic decision to deny terrorists the benefits of their actions.

The United States may be able to employ a strategy of strategic denial to deter its principal terrorist adversary, al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda's primary strategic objective has been to force the "far enemy," the United States, out of the Middle East, so that it can topple "apostate" regimes in the region and reestablish a caliphate under Shari'a law. The United States might be able to deter al-Qaeda by credibly threatening to refuse to alter U.S. posture in the Middle East in response to terror attacks. If the United States can convince al-Qaeda that the U.S. presence in the Middle East will be sustained regardless of the level of terrorist violence that al-Qaeda inflicts upon the United States or its allies, then Washington will have reduced al-Qaeda's incentives to attack.

In order to make threats of strategic denial credible, states must communicate through a variety of different channels. Leaders can verbally declare that they

will not allow terrorism to affect national security decisions. Verbal statements can (and often should) be dismissed as cheap talk, however. For this reason, states also must communicate through action. Thomas Schelling discussed, for example, how states could take actions that tied their own hands in order to make threats more credible.[27] For example, the United States could continue to maintain large-scale and expensive military infrastructure in the Middle East, such as U.S. military bases in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Kuwait. This would make it more difficult for Washington to simply abandon the region in response to successful terrorist attacks.

In addition, states also may be able to increase the credibility of their threats by developing a reputation for toughness. Terrorist groups should be less likely to target states that have a reputation for steadfastly refusing to negotiate with terrorists. The United States at present, unfortunately, possesses a reputation for quickly capitulating to terrorist demands. Following Hezbollah's 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut, for example, the United States quickly pulled all of its forces out of Lebanon.[28] In addition, the U.S. decision to redeploy troops out of Saudi Arabia in 2003 was perceived by many as a concession to al-Qaeda following the 9/11 attacks.[29] In order to regain its credibility, the United States should adopt a policy that emphasizes Washington's intention to deny terrorists their strategic demands and then consistently follow through on that intention. Future U.S. force posture decisions should not be influenced by the wishes of terrorist organizations. Indeed, standing firm in the face of terrorist attacks now may be the only way to rehabilitate Washington's credibility and discourage terrorism in the future.

According to post-9/11 security strategy documents, the United States will attempt to counter ideological support for terrorism, in part, by delegitimizing terrorism as a tactic.[30] But when dealing with a dangerous enemy, it may be wiser to appeal to interests than to a moral compass. Many analysts argue that terrorism thrives, not because it is a virtuous strategy, but because it is brutally effective. Levels of international terrorism may only recede if individuals come to believe that terrorism is no longer the best means of achieving their goals. States may only be able to defeat terrorism when they are able to shatter the widespread perception that terrorism is an effective strategy.

Deterrence is Necessary, but not Sufficient

This article presents a comprehensive framework for deterring terrorist networks. We argue that deterrence can only achieve partial success and will only ever be a component, not the cornerstone, of counterterrorism strategy. Despite its limited role, deterrence is an essential part of an effective counterterrorism approach.

Deterrence should be an essential component, but never a cornerstone, of counterterrorism strategy.

U.S. strategies for deterring terrorism will undoubtedly become more sophisticated over time, and there are a number of immediate steps that could greatly improve our ability to deter terror. First, the United States needs to improve its ability to conduct strategic communications to convey a coherent and consistent message to terrorist networks. Tactical denial policies require not only that the United States develop the ability to thwart terrorist attacks, but also that it clearly communicates that capability to terrorists. Similarly, in order to pursue strategic denial strategies, the United States must refuse to concede to terrorists' demands even in the face of successful attacks. In short, Washington must clearly and consistently broadcast the message that terrorism will fail.

In addition, the United States' ability to deter terrorism could be improved by a more sophisticated understanding of our terrorist adversaries. While our knowledge of terrorists has greatly improved since 9/11, there is more we need to know: What do terrorists value that we can hold at risk? What are terrorists' tactical and strategic goals? What threat of failure must they face in order to call off a particular terrorist attack, or to abandon terrorism altogether? Obtaining such detailed information will require, for example, the U.S. government to design interrogation policies (legal ones, of course) to extract this type of information from detained terrorists. At present, interrogations are often conducted with the primary goal of obtaining actionable intelligence relating to ongoing terrorist operations. This continues to be an important function, but captured terrorists also contain a treasure trove of information about the hopes and fears of terrorists. Such information can be legally extracted and readily exploited in an effective deterrence policy.

While deterrence has become more important in U.S. counterterrorism strategy in recent years, much work remains to be done. By ensuring that deterrence precepts are elevated to the forefront of internal government and public debates about counterterrorism strategy, the United States can reduce the likelihood that Americans will ever have to live through another day like September 11, 2001.

Notes

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