PolicyWatch #1371

Highlighting al-Qaeda's Bankrupt Ideology

By Matthew Levitt and Michael Jacobson
May 7, 2008

According to recent U.S. government reports and senior U.S. counterterrorism officials, contesting al-Qaeda's message is no less important than capturing or killing the group's operatives. And as the administration prioritizes its agenda for the last eight months in office, recognizing the need for a refocused communication plan to highlight the bankruptcy of al-Qaeda's ideology is a critical -- albeit overdue -- part of a reengineered counterterrorism strategy.

"All Elements of National Power"

The State Department's 2007 *Country Reports on Terrorism* and recent speeches by senior officials indicate that the U.S. government's communication strategy for combating al-Qaeda's ideology has shifted considerably in two respects. First, there is increased recognition that communication must be an integral part of counterterrorism strategy. As Ambassador Dell Dailey, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, recently noted, "Communication should...be used by the United States and its allies to shape perceptions, build allies, and dissuade potential terrorists. This must be a central component in U.S. strategy because it influences attitudes and behavior."

According to Deputy National Security Advisor Juan Zarate, this is particularly true when it comes to al-Qaeda, whose leaders are "sensitive to the perceived legitimacy of both their actions and their ideology. They care about their image because it has real-world effects on recruitment, donations, and support in Muslim and religious communities."

While the U.S. government paid attention to its communication strategy in the first few years following the September 11 attacks, counterterrorism officials were far more focused on capturing or killing terrorists. Today contesting al-Qaeda's ideology is an integral part of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

Focus on Terrorists

Although the "struggle of ideas in the Islamic world" section of the State Department report still focuses on the U.S. government's attempts to explain its policies and values, its message has undergone a serious overhaul. The initial U.S. approach in the wake of the September 11 attacks was to try and sell the United States to overseas audiences, an approach widely regarded as ineffective in stemming the tide of radicalization. Efforts now concentrate on discrediting the terrorists.

The United States has gone about this using a two-fold approach. As National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) director Michael Leiter suggests, the United States is trying to point out "how bankrupt" al-Qaeda's ideology is, and demonstrate that "it is al-Qaeda, and not the West, that is truly at war with Islam" by highlighting the extent to which Muslims are victims of the organization's attacks. At a press conference releasing the State Department report, both Ambassador Dailey and NCTC deputy director Russ Travers emphasized that more than 50 percent of the victims of al-Qaeda attacks last year were Muslim, in addition to the approximately 100 targeted mosques.

In general, the United States is trying to highlight the fact that al-Qaeda is a merciless and cruel organization whose tactics -- such as deploying mentally deficient people as suicide bombers -- are repugnant. As Leiter argued, "showing the barbarism of groups like al-Qaeda in the light of truth is, ultimately, our strongest weapon." The United States is now even using this approach to try and give al-Qaeda second thoughts about using a weapon of mass destruction (WMD). Leiter pointed out that people in the Muslim world are already turning against al-Qaeda, and "no barbarism could be greater than the use of WMD." While the early results of this new approach are promising, as Department of Homeland Security undersecretary Charles Allen noted, at this point, "no Western state has effectively countered the al-Qaeda narrative."

Shrinking al-Qaeda Down to Size

After years of emphasizing the seriousness of the terrorist threat, the United States is now concerned that the widespread view of a resurgent al-Qaeda may be helping the organization recruit new members. As Ambassador Dailey stated, one of al-Qaeda's goals is to "create a perception of a worldwide movement more powerful than it actually is." Consequently, the United States seems to be making a concerted effort to avoid contributing to this phenomenon. In fact, while acknowledging that the organization is resurgent in its safe haven along Pakistan's Afghan border, a number of senior administration officials have begun to predict victory. Zarate, for example, cited a number of "important signs that mark progress and point to the eventual demise of al-Qaeda." In an April speech at Chatham House in London, FBI Director Robert Mueller suggested that al-Qaeda would be destroyed within a matter of years, not decades.

An International -- Not Just American -- Problem

While the report makes clear that American targets remain a high priority for al-Qaeda, it also highlights the fact that the United States is not alone atop the target list. The 2004 Madrid attacks, the 2005 London attacks, and the recently thwarted plots in Germany, England, and Scotland demonstrate that Europe faces an equally serious threat. In fact, a review of the State Department report and the European Union's 2007 terrorism report (issued by Europol, the EU's law enforcement organization) reveals that Americans and Europeans now see the nature of the threat in similar terms.

For example, both reports focus on the danger posed by al-Qaeda's resurgence in Pakistan's tribal areas. According to the EU report, al-Qaeda-linked terrorist cells were uncovered in Denmark and Germany in 2007. As a result, the Europol report explains that the EU no longer views al-Qaeda as merely a threat to the UK, with its large expatriate Pakistani community, but to other European countries as well. More recently, a suspected terrorist network comprised almost entirely of Pakistanis was discovered in Spain. After the cell was arrested, a Spanish judge commented that, "In my opinion, the jihadi threat from Pakistan is the biggest emerging threat we are facing in Europe."

Conclusion

Refocusing U.S. efforts to include a robust strategic communication blueprint is a critical component of an overall counterterrorism strategy. Arresting and killing operatives alone does little to counter the disturbingly effective radicalization campaign through which al-Qaeda and like-minded groups build both physical and virtual support networks.

To effectively engage in this transnational battle of ideas, the U.S. and allied governments will have to work in concert -- something easier said than done. Despite their shared views of the terrorist threat, U.S. officials worry that the United States and Europe still approach counterterrorism in fundamentally different ways. In a speech at Kansas State University in April, CIA Director Michael Hayden referred to a "transatlantic divide" between the United States and Europe on counterterrorism issues. In Hayden's opinion, the Europeans "tend not to view terrorism as we do, as an overwhelming international challenge. Or if they do, we often differ on what would be effective and appropriate to counter it." Europeans, meanwhile, describe cyberspace as one of the most critical battlefields in the war on terror, and note with significant frustration that many of the worst

offending terrorist propaganda websites are still hosted in the United States.

America's new strategic communication battle plan is a strong step in the right direction. Finding ways to get this new message out to the right audiences in Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East will require a renewed dedication to transnational cooperation in a war that will be increasingly fought on a virtual battlefield.

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