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Status Check on the Struggle against Global Terrorism

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The State Department's recently released *Country Reports on Terrorism 2009* (*CRT 2009*) reveals several important trends in the evolution of global terrorism. The good news is that al-Qaeda is facing significant pressure, even as the organization and its affiliates and followers retain the intent and capability to carry out attacks. What remains to be seen is if the dispersion of the global jihadist threat from the heart of the Middle East to South Asia and Africa foreshadows organizational decline or revival for al-Qaeda itself and the radical jihadist ideology it espouses. How governments and civil society alike organize to contend with the changing threat will be central to this determination. The bad news is that governments and civil society remain woefully ineffective at reducing the spread and appeal of radical Islamist extremism.

Al-Qaeda under Pressure

While the Pakistan-based al-Qaeda senior leadership (AQSL) continues to represent the most acute terrorist threat to the United States, pressure from Pakistani military operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas has left al-Qaeda significantly weakened. The group suffered substantial losses in its senior leadership as a result of U.S. drone attacks, including its head of external operations, Saleh al-Somali, in December. And successful Pakistani military strikes, such as Operation Raah-i-Nijaat in October, following the death of Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, have extended the government's control to previously ungoverned areas.

Despite counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts, terrorist attacks within Afghanistan and Pakistan persist. Attacks in Afghanistan nearly doubled from 2008 to 2009, while attacks in Pakistan increased for the third consecutive year. Furthermore, Pakistan has served as the training ground for terrorists who have attempted attacks on American soil, including the failed New York subway bomber Najibullah Zazi. One troubling fact noted in both the State Department report and the 2009 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* (*TE-SAT*) is the number of European citizens traveling to Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight on behalf of al-Qaeda or the Taliban, receiving military training, and then returning to their home countries capable of carrying out attacks.

In addition to operational setbacks, al-Qaeda steadily lost popular standing within the worldwide Muslim community in response to the number of Muslims targeted by its attacks. According to the National Counterterrorism Center's statistical annex, Muslims accounted for well over 50 percent of terrorism fatalities in 2009. A noted increase has also occurred in the number of Muslim clerics and former militants challenging al-Qaeda as a result.

Al-Qaeda's Dispersion

Though al-Qaeda's core leadership may have dwindled in 2009, its losses were partially offset by the growth of its affiliated groups. In January 2009, al-Qaeda affiliates in Saudi Arabia merged with al-Qaeda in Yemen to form al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with the stated goals of abolishing both the Saudi and Yemeni governments and recreating the caliphate. With the Yemeni government focused on domestic security dynamics, most notably the "Sixth War" of the Houthi rebellion and an emerging southern separatist

movement, AQAP was left to operate freely in the country's tribal areas. The report also notes the impact of strengthened Saudi counterterrorism efforts, as well as the return of foreign fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the heightened terrorist presence in Yemen.

In Somalia, the terrorist group al-Shabab managed to seize control of large swaths of territory and has publicly proclaimed its allegiance to AQSL. Al-Shabab is made up of distinct armed clan militias and, though not officially linked to al-Qaeda, has close rhetorical and ideological ties to the group. Owing to the Transitional Federal Government's weak grip on the country, and in concert with persistent violent instability, poorly guarded borders and coasts, and proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia has become a main terrorist thoroughfare and launch point for domestic and foreign attacks. In fact, several foreign non-al-Shabab operatives penetrated Somalia's borders and successfully carried out attacks inside the country. Only the Taliban claimed responsibility for more attacks than al-Shabab in 2009, and the Somali group has also threatened to target both America and Israel.

The Threat at Home

Perhaps the most worrying trend exposed in the State Department report is the documented rise in homegrown radicalization and attempted attacks within the United States. There have been forty-six reported incidents of domestic radicalization and recruitment since September 2001; 30 percent took place in 2009. In June 2009, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, a convert to Islam, opened fire at an army recruitment center in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one. This attack followed closely on the heels of Muhammad's two-year residence in Yemen, where he was arrested in 2008 for overstaying his visa. In September, a Pakistani-American noted earlier, Najibullah Zazi, was arrested for planning an attack on the New York subway system. Zazi, who received training from al-Qaeda and led a domestic al-Qaeda cell, is currently facing charges for conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction. The shooting attack at Fort Hood, Texas, occurred in November, and the next month, on Christmas Day, a British-educated Nigerian trained by AQAP in Yemen tried to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 with explosives sewn into his underwear.

According to the European Union's latest terrorism report, two-thirds of violent Islamist terrorists arrested on terrorism charges were not linked to a particular terrorist group. Rather, they adhered to al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology without proper membership in, or support from, the organization itself. Al-Qaeda's use of English-speaking internet propagandists has expanded its online reach to larger Western audiences.

Countering Violent Extremism

While the U.S. government is engaged in efforts to better understand how individuals become susceptible to the radical Islamist ideology purveyed by al-Qaeda and its ilk -- the "upstream" political, economic, and social factors -- it does nothing to compete with the radical Islamist message. *CRT 2009* highlights the efforts of several Middle Eastern and European countries to contend with what the report describes in the context of its remarks on Denmark as "militant Islamist ideology" but has little to say on U.S. efforts to do the same. Indeed *CRT 2009* refers to country-specific initiatives targeting self-defined Jihadi groups and their underlying extremist ideologies, but never -- with the exception of the entry on Denmark -- references as distinct concepts radical Islamic extremism, Jihadism, or other understandings of the ideology behind today's global terrorist threat.

CRT 2009 does implicitly acknowledge that our adversary's radical ideology targets Muslim communities, noting that "in many cases, Muslims have more credibility than the U.S. government in addressing these issues in their own communities." They are best positioned, the report notes, "to convey effective counter-narratives capable of discrediting violent extremism in a way that makes sense to their local community, and only they have the credibility to counter the religious claims made by violent extremists." More needs to be done to empower these counternarratives as tools against the violent extremism that is central to the radical Islamist narrative. *CRT 2009* recognizes this need, and implicitly agrees that not enough is being done: "The United States can help empower these local actors through programmatic assistance, funding, or simply by providing

them with space -- physical or electronic -- to challenge violent extremist views."

Conclusion

For all the tactical counterterrorism successes documented in *CRT 2009*, the most significant finding of the report is the one that is missing: strategic counterterrorism success remains elusive. Al-Qaeda senior leadership has been in hiding and on the run for several years now, but despite losing safe havens and facing hard financial times, the organization and its affiliates and like-minded followers remain capable of recruiting new foot soldiers and executing attacks. Unfortunately, despite the sharp rise in terrorist plots and cases of homegrown radicalization, specific policies and programs aimed squarely at countering the radical narrative remain few and far between. It is axiomatic that the United States cannot simply capture and kill its way out of the problem; it must find a way to take on the extremist ideology directly. As concluded by the recent Washington Institute strategic report *Fighting the Ideological Battle*, failure to recognize the impact of radical Islamism -- an extremist political ideology separate and apart from Islam as a religion -- as a key driver framing, motivating, and justifying violent extremism hampers efforts to intervene early enough in the radicalization process to prevent individuals from becoming violent.

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