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A Resurgent al-Qaeda and U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy

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Media headlines following the April 30 release of the State Department's annual report on global terrorism developments, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2006*, focused on the theme of increased terrorism. But the 335-page document, along with its accompanying statistical assessment produced by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), also contained important insights into the U.S. administration's evolving strategy to counter the terrorist threat.

Evolution in U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy

The 2006 report indicates that the United States is adapting its approach to countering global terrorism. In the years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States focused on taking aggressive action against terrorists and maintaining a hard line with foreign governments. This was reflected in the four counterterrorism policy principles outlined in the State Department's 2004 report: (1) make no concessions to terrorists and strike no deals, (2) bring terrorists to justice, (3) isolate and pressure state sponsors of terrorism, and (4) improve the counterterrorism capabilities of allies.

This year's report strikes a different tone. While the United States still must eliminate the leadership of terrorist organizations, the report notes that "incarcerating or killing terrorists will not achieve an end to terrorism." According to the report, one of the most important and challenging aspects of combating terrorism is "addressing the underlying conditions that terrorists exploit," which include "geo-political issues, lack of economic opportunity and political participation, ethnic conflict, ungoverned space, or political injustice." In addition, a section of the report is devoted to "the struggle of ideas," and how the United States is incorporating public diplomacy into its counterterrorism efforts in an effort to counter the "extremist rhetoric and disinformation coming from hostile groups."

Background

The U.S. government has produced an annual report on global terrorist trends since 1976. The CIA issued the reports until 1982, when the State Department assumed this responsibility. Congress first made the annual reports mandatory in 1987, subsequently broadening the scope of the report in 1996 by requiring not only information about international terrorist groups, but also assessments of other countries' cooperation on counterterrorism matters. The reports also include detailed statistics on the number of terrorist attacks and victims.

In 2004, the State Department transferred responsibility for assessing and releasing terrorism statistics to NCTC, given its statutory role as the government's "shared knowledge bank" on global terrorism. To more accurately reflect the narrowed scope of the report, the State Department changed the title of its series from *Patterns of Global Terrorism* to *Country Reports on Terrorism*. In 2005, the State Department added a section to the report focused on terrorist sanctuaries and terrorist groups' efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

A Resurgent al-Qaeda

According to the NCTC terrorism statistics, there were approximately 14,000 attacks defined as "terrorist" in 2006, resulting in more than 20,000 deaths. From 2005, this is a 25 percent increase in attacks and a 40 percent rise in deaths. The Middle East and South Asia were the most dangerous regions in 2006, as hosts to 90 percent of the "high-casualty" incidents (defined as killing more than ten people). Within these regions, about 750 attacks took place in Afghanistan, and 6,600 occurred in Iraq, causing 13,000 fatalities. While the statistics are sobering and paint a vivid picture of the global terrorist threat, there are several less publicized aspects of these reports even more important for U.S. policymakers. First, the NCTC report describes an al-Qaeda organization that appears to have rebounded. NCTC refers to a "steadfast al-Qaeda" that is "planning attacks in northwest Pakistan, and was able to expand its propaganda campaign in 2006 to invigorate supporters, win converts and gain recruits." In fact, the report notes that al-Qaeda leaders allegedly played an important role in "steering" terrorists in the United Kingdom, whose plot to blow up ten U.S.–bound planes was foiled in August 2006.

Al-Qaeda's affiliates were also able to carry out several successful attacks in 2006. Most prominently, al-Qaeda in Iraq destroyed the al-Askariya mosque in the Iraqi city of Samarra, a Shia holy site, leading to a round of sectarian violence. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula conducted the first attack on a Saudi oil facility in February 2006, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) -- formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat until its August 2006 merger with al-Qaeda -- attacked a U.S. target in Algeria in December (the group has since claimed responsibility for two April 2007 suicide car bombings in Algiers that killed thirty-three and injured more than three hundred).

In contrast, at the time the State Department's 2004 report was issued, al-Qaeda was seen as an organization whose capability had been dramatically decreased. The report assessed that al-Qaeda had been "weakened operationally," and that the United States and its allies had degraded its leadership abilities and depleted its operational ranks. While al-Qaeda remained focused on attacking U.S. interests, the report noted that its ability to conduct large-scale attacks had been diminished. The spurring of a "grassroots" movement of terrorist networks and cells, inspired by al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden but with no direct ties to them, were thought to be the emerging threat.

Based on the 2006 reports, it appears that the terrorist threat has become even more complex and diverse, which presents serious counterterrorism challenges for the United States and its allies. For example, NCTC determined that almost 300 different groups were involved in terrorist attacks in 2006. It reported that, of these, "Sunni terrorist groups" claimed responsibility for more attacks than any other group in 2006. This broad category includes a variety of terrorist organizations including al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and the "grassroots" or "homegrown" terrorist cells. In fact, according to the State Department, the terrorist threat has been transformed to the point that it is now a "form of global insurgency."

Safe Havens

The report lists a variety of safe havens throughout the world, still available to terrorist organizations, where they can "organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train and operate in relative security." Most notable from the U.S. perspective is Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which were transformed into a safe haven after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. Both al-Qaeda and Afghan insurgents have a presence in FATA, and local tribes and Islamist groups have pushed back against Pakistani government efforts to increase control in this area. Earlier this week, a U.S. soldier died on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border when a meeting between U.S. and Pakistani officials was fired upon.

In Africa, the Trans-Sahara and Somalia are cited as safe havens, as al-Qaeda operatives have found refuge in the former and AQIM continues to operate with relative impunity in the latter. East Asia also has areas considered to be safe havens, which the al-Qaeda–affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf group continue to use to their advantage. Hizballah and Hamas have been able to exploit the loosely governed

Tri-Border Area in Latin America, where they conduct illicit activities to raise funds for their organizations. Finally, while Iraq is not included in this category, the report notes that terrorists "view Iraq as a potential safe haven and are attempting to make it a reality."

Conclusion

While the terrorist threat described in the report is somewhat disheartening, the report inspires confidence in one respect. The assessment of the terrorist threat is straightforward and balanced, suggesting that the U.S. government's understanding of the enemy it is facing has improved, even as the global jihadist movement grows increasingly complex. The United States also clearly recognizes that a comprehensive approach -- broader than only military, intelligence, and law enforcement action -- will be required to defeat this global movement.

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