

Towards a “Political Turn” in the Fight against Jihadist Terrorism

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Despite all the measures taken against al-Qaeda and like-minded organizations after September 11, 2001, Jihadist terrorism has remained a dangerous threat. Although it would be exaggerated to state that Jihadist organizations have become stronger, al-Qaeda’s biggest success may have been that it avoided total disintegration. To survive in an increasingly hostile environment, it changed its structures and strategies. As a consequence of the failure to root out al-Qaeda after 2001, Jihadist terrorism is likely to pose a threat for years to come.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations and networks remain a force to be reckoned with because the Jihadist phenomenon has developed. The core organization around Osama bin Laden and his deputy Aiman al-Zawahiri may have weakened, but affiliated groups and cells in the Arab world and Pakistan have gained in importance and have continued their Holy War against the West and regimes in their home countries.

Since 2001, three trends have characterized the development of Jihadist terrorism: the return of Arab volunteers from Afghanistan to their home countries, the emergence of new organizations only loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda, and al-Qaeda’s change from organization to ideology.

- In 2001 al-Qaeda was mainly an Arab organization. When it lost its headquarters in Afghanistan, many of its fighters returned to their countries of origin in the Arab world. As a consequence, Jihadist terrorism returned to the Middle East, where the terrorist threat had lost some of the importance it had had in the mid-1990s. For instance, al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula started an unprecedented terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia in May 2003, which lasted well into 2005. Today, Jihadists are again a force to be reckoned with all over the Middle East. North

Africa is threatened in particular, as the new al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is spearheading a trend towards militant activity in Algeria and its neighboring countries.

- New Jihadist organizations have emerged and aligned themselves with “al-Qaeda central” in the Pakistani mountains. The Iraq war has proven to be the most important breeding ground for these organizations. In 2004, the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and used the rare opportunity to fight the American troops and their allies in one of the core countries of the Arab world. Until 2007, al-Qaeda in Iraq was even more powerful than the al-Qaeda leadership around bin Laden. By renaming itself, al-Qaeda in Iraq aimed at accessing al-Qaeda’s recruiting and financing networks in the Gulf region. It was clearly not subordinate to al-Qaeda central, but spread the impression that al-Qaeda was indeed a transnational organization with global reach. However, al-Qaeda in Iraq was severely weakened after the American “surge” in 2007.

- The al-Qaeda leadership escaped to the Pakistani side of the Afghan-Pakistani border in late 2001. From October 2001, bin Laden and Zawahiri increasingly relied on video and audio messages to spread their ideology, but also strategic and tactical advice to their followers worldwide. Thereby, they managed to retain some of their former influence. In fact, in several cases attacks were perpetrated in countries after Osama bin Laden had demanded action there. To the extent, however, that the al-Qaeda leadership was no longer able to orchestrate attacks from its headquarters, Jihadist terrorism became more independent from larger organizations, especially in Europe.

Nevertheless, a resurgent al-Qaeda managed to regain some of its former capabilities. From 2005 on, the organization managed to plan several terrorist attacks in Europe. New operational leaders based in the Pakistani tribal areas planned the July 2005 London underground bombings, the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot, and attacks on American and Uzbek targets in Germany in September 2007.¹ Al-Qaeda spectacularly regained its capabilities to act as a transnational terrorist organization. Its focus, however, was now firmly set on Afghanistan, where the chances of success grew after the Taliban intensified the insurgency against the multinational forces from spring 2006 on. The al-Qaeda leadership seemed to be firmly established in the Pakistani tribal areas. It is not entirely clear

1. The two most important operational chiefs between 2005 and 2007 were the Egyptian Abu Ubaida al-Masri (d. 2007) and the Libyan Abu Laith al-Libi (d. 2008).

whether al-Qaeda will be able to sustain these successes in the coming years. But if it does, it will remain a force to be reckoned with. It is not very likely to topple regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. Yet if it continues its resurgence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it might have the chance to remain a security problem for years to come. Most importantly, it might become a graver threat if it ever manages to perpetrate attacks with radioactive devices such as "dirty bombs." The more sophisticated its organizational structure, the more likely such a scenario becomes.

While the balance sheet of seven years of countering Jihadist terrorism is mixed, this short summary on the state of al-Qaeda and the Jihadist phenomenon in general makes it clear that the "war on terror" has failed. Seven years after the attacks in New York and Washington, Jihadist terrorism is a more widespread phenomenon than in 2001. Its most important proponents, al-Qaeda and its leader bin Laden, remain active. The organization has increased its appeal to European Muslims and has returned to the Arab world, where it has spearheaded an insurgency in Iraq for more than five years and where it is challenging authoritarian regimes all over the region. Obviously, the strategies adopted in the fight against Jihadist terrorism have proven inadequate.

Seven years after the 2001 attacks, Jihadist terrorism is a more widespread phenomenon

The reasons are manifold. The most serious tactical mistake was the invasion of Iraq, which gave a new generation of Jihadist fighters the opportunity to fight the United States in the heart of the Arab world. The loss of focus on Afghanistan played a role as well. Many of the successes in the fight against al-Qaeda in 2002 and 2003 were due to intensive cooperation with Pakistani security forces. Already as of 2002, the United States concentrated its intelligence resources on Iraq, a mistake that allowed al-Qaeda to reorganize in Pakistan and to reestablish their alliance with the Taliban. However, the gravest strategic mistake was that the United States and its allies ignored the Arab dimension of the phenomenon: The different groups that later constituted al-Qaeda had emerged in the fight against the authoritarian regimes of their home countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and others). Only after they had failed in their bid to topple the ruling regimes there, did they decide to focus their fight against the most important supporter of these governments, namely the United States and the West in general. This motive is still important for many Jihadists in the Arab world. As a consequence, political change in the Arab world is the most important precondition for successfully countering Jihadist terrorism.

International Cooperation

Despite all the measures adopted after September 11, 2001, multilateral cooperation in counterterrorism did not have much influence on the actual situation. The Bush administration followed an essentially unilateral strategy and invited its partners to join in “coalitions of the willing.” It was quite successful in this regard when – shortly after September 11th – it looked for allies to help it to topple the Taliban in Afghanistan and later to rebuild the country. Many countries followed, including Great Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Spain, Italy, and many others. However, doubts soon spread as to whether American strategies suited the phenomenon. Especially the American predilection for conventional military solutions created resistance among European populations and governments.

These conflicts erupted when the American government decided to invade Iraq. While some European governments, such as Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and Poland, decided to support the United States, France and Germany rejected the invasion, reflecting a widespread European unease with American policies after 9/11. The war had serious consequences for transatlantic relations, since it led to a prolonged estrangement between the Bush administration on the one side and Chancellor Schröder and President Chirac on the other. Furthermore, the European Union was split on this issue, weakening its cohesion for the coming years. This hindered the Europeans from more effectively influencing and thereby moderating US policies. In fact, international initiatives were more often than not ill-fated efforts of American allies to convince the Bush administration that its policies only aggravated the problem they were designed to fight. Rather than winning trust in the home countries of the Jihadists, the US lost the last remnants of credibility and support it might have had among Arabs and Muslims after 2001.

Rather than winning the hearts and minds of potential al-Qaeda supporters, US policies seemed perfectly designed to prove that Osama bin Laden’s claim, that the world had declared war on Islam, was correct. In European counterterrorism circles, it is rather common sense that a state that has become the target of a terrorist organization should not overreact. By definition, terrorists are weak and perpetrate attacks in order to mobilize sympathizers for their goals. A state that overreacts and cracks down not only on the terrorists themselves but also on their potential supporters risks alienating and pushing them into the arms of the terrorists. On the other hand, a state that reacts in a circumspect way might isolate the terrorists from their sympathizers and thereby hinder

their radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization. Some terrorist organizations, among them many Jihadist ones, even try to provoke their adversaries to overreact in order to convince their sympathizers that only violence offers the chance to reach their goals.

The United States government (over-)reacted just as the Jihadists wished. The treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib were only two of the most blatant examples of counterproductive measures. "Extraordinary renditions" to Middle Eastern countries like Jordan, Egypt, and Syria, where torture during interrogation is common, is another example. The United States' blatant disregard for human rights played into the hands of al-Qaeda. Today more than in 2001, Muslims all over the world believe that the US and the West are fighting Islam or the Muslim world rather than just terrorism. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 finally convinced many young Arabs that the Muslim world is the target. Many of those young Arab men who have traveled to Iraq in order to join the insurgency are motivated by the desire to defend the Muslim world against this aggression (Steinberg, 2008). As a consequence, the Iraq war triggered a wave of terrorist activity in the Arab and Muslim world as well as in Europe.

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Furthermore, the Bush administration's overreactions damaged relations with allied countries. In several cases, European governments protested when their citizens became victims of renditions. In other cases, they tried to convince the US that its policies were counterproductive. Nevertheless, European and Middle Eastern allies shared the US focus on security. Rather than looking for political strategies in order to isolate the terrorists' sympathizers, they focused on repressive measures. This was true on the domestic level, but also influenced international cooperation. After 2001, international cooperation in security matters was expanded in an unprecedented way. Most international organizations either set up counterterrorism committees or intensified their activities in this field. Their influence is limited, however, because the fight against terrorism largely remains the prerogative of the member states' police forces and intelligence services, if not their militaries. Nation-states in general consider their security forces' efforts to be central dimensions of their sovereignty – especially with regard to counterterrorism. Therefore, these services tend to work on a bilateral rather than a multilateral basis. Their readiness to share information is limited. Only in the context of larger military alliances like NATO does multilateral cooperation play a slightly

larger role.² At the same time, the CIA has become a clearinghouse for intelligence services worldwide. The US security services have intensified (bilateral) cooperation with a large number of states and their services in order to more effectively fight Jihadist terrorism worldwide. Multilateral efforts are far less important in practice.

This development is unfortunate, because both multilateral and bilateral cooperation are important in order to effectively counter Jihadist terrorism. It is the transnational nature of the threat and its broad range of goals that require increased international cooperation. Jihadist organizations target the United States, Russia, the West in general, and the regimes of the Arab and Muslim worlds. Thus, it is only logical that the potential targets cooperate. However, while cooperation in repressive counterterrorism has increased, there is still no consensus on the exact nature of Jihadism and the strategies to counter it. Most importantly, there is no consensus on root causes and political strategies.

The Roots of al-Qaeda in the Arab World

Even at the time of the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda was not the global organization many analysts claimed that it was. Rather, al-Qaeda's goals have always been ambivalent. On the one hand, it has followed a global agenda. This was a concrete goal insofar as the organization aimed to cause the US to withdraw from the Arab and Muslim worlds, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This agenda becomes diffuse, however, with regard to its goals beyond this withdrawal. Al-Qaeda and its affiliated organizations have never clearly stated where and when their jihad would end. On the other hand, al-Qaeda has always constituted the sum of its member groups' national aims. The Egyptians want to topple the Mubarak regime in their home country. Bin Laden and his Saudi followers demand the overthrow of the Saudi ruling family in Saudi Arabia. As a consequence, al-Qaeda aims at multiple revolutions in its Arab home countries in order to topple the authoritarian regimes there. Its global jihad supports this original goal of most Jihadists only to some extent. Only from the mid-1990s, when it became clear that Jihadist militants would not be able to reach their goals in their home countries, did al-Qaeda adopt an anti-American strategy. By forcing a withdrawal of the United States from the Arab world, al-Qaeda hoped to weaken the regimes that depended on American support.

2. See, e.g., the reports about "Alliance Base," a joint intelligence center in Paris, which includes representatives from Britain, France, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the United States. See Priest (2005) and Smolar (2006).

The most important example for this trend in Jihadist terrorism has been the history of the Egyptian Jihad group led by Aiman al-Zawahiri, today number two in the al-Qaeda hierarchy. The Egyptian militants had targeted the regime in Cairo from the 1970s and had assassinated President Anwar al-Sadat in October 1981. However, their plot to topple the regime failed and triggered a wave of arrests in the coming years. From the mid-1980s, many Egyptians fled the repression in their home country and joined the Arabs fighting alongside the Afghan insurgents in Pakistan. Far from adopting an internationalist agenda, the Egyptians regarded their stay rather as a prelude to another effort to fight the "near enemy," namely the Mubarak regime. In fact, in 1992, the Egyptian groups started an insurgency in Egypt itself. In 1995, however, it became clear that the Egyptian state had gained the upper hand and that the Islamists had failed. Aiman al-Zawahiri drew the consequences and devised a new strategy: instead of fighting the "near enemy," the Jihadists should redirect their efforts towards the United States, Russia, and Israel. From now on, the Jihadists should fight "the near and the far enemy" in an integrated worldwide campaign.³

Subsequently, Zawahiri and his followers laid the organizational basis for the implementation of their strategy. In 1996–1997, they entered into an alliance with Osama bin Laden and his followers in Afghanistan. This event marked the foundation of al-Qaeda as a global terrorist organization. Nevertheless, al-Qaeda chose to attack the US first and foremost because it was the most important foreign supporter of both the Saudi and Egyptian governments. And although al-Qaeda increasingly widened the scope of its activities and developed a global agenda, it remained committed to the goal of overthrowing the autocratic governments in its militants' respective home countries. As a result, it was able to attract young men from all over the Arab world, from Morocco to Iraq. In fact, its ideological and strategic flexibility allows it to recruit both more nationalist-minded and more globally oriented fighters.

The local and regional dimensions of al-Qaeda's activity hint at the roots of the movement and at the root causes of Jihadist terrorism: the brutal suppression of Islamist opposition movements in the Arab world through authoritarian regimes. After first attempts to topple these regimes in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s failed, Islamist militants used the opportunity to unite and reorganize abroad. Arab civil wars have laid the foundation of global Jihadism.

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3. Zawahiri himself described this change of strategy in his book *Knights under the Prophet's Banner (Fursan tahta rayat al-nabi)*, which appeared shortly after September 11, 2001. See al-Zawahiri (2001).

The Internationalization of Jihadist Terrorism after 2001

Since 2001 the Islamo-nationalists have lost some of their former influence in the Jihadist movement. This is partly due to the fact that they are confronted with a reckless global fight against terrorist organizations led by the United States. Therefore, fighting the West has gained importance for these movements and their supporters. Perhaps most importantly, al-Qaeda has been able to broaden its base by successfully recruiting and

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increasing the number of non-Arab Muslims in its ranks. Especially from 2003, ethnic Pakistanis, Kurds, and Turks have joined the movement, most of them in Europe. Al-Qaeda has profited from the growing attractiveness of its global aims among young Muslims worldwide. Likewise, several Islamo-nationalist organizations have joined al-Qaeda. The most important was the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC). In late January 2007, it announced that it had changed its name to “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami).

The GSPC had been as much a nationalist as an Islamist organization. Since its founding in 1998, it explicitly confined its activities to Algeria, where it aimed to topple the government and set up an Islamic state. By the turn of the century, the GSPC had established itself as the most important militant organization in Algeria, but remained far from achieving its stated goals. While it managed to gain limited support among Algerian militant Islamists, the population was convinced that armed struggle was not a way to bring about changes in Algeria. As a consequence, the GSPC was forced onto the defensive and the security forces succeeded in confining the group’s operations to a mountainous region east and southeast of Algiers. Larger-scale terrorist attacks were exceptions.

After September 11, 2001, pressure on the GSPC grew. The Bush administration identified Algeria as an important field of al-Qaeda activity and enhanced its counterterrorism cooperation with the Algerian government: the weakening of the GSPC was partly a consequence of American (and also European) technological and logistical support for Algeria’s security forces. International cooperation with Algeria intensified after the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in the Sahara in spring 2003.⁴ The kidnapping supported the Algerian

4. The hostages were released in two groups in May and August 2003. A German woman died of heat stroke.

government's assertions, which since 2001 had tried to reframe its struggle against the country's militant groups as part of the American "war on terrorism."

As early as October 2003, Nabil Sahraoui, then the GSPC's leader, announced that the organization had subordinated itself to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organization and to the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and would support their fight against the US. In the coming years, it built contacts to al-Qaeda, especially to the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia" (Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidain).⁵ Sahraoui's successor, Abu Musab Abdalwudud, continued his predecessor's policy. In June 2004, he confirmed the new international thrust of the GSPC by declaring war on all Western foreigners in Algeria. In December 2006, the group carried out its first attack on a foreign target in several years and in January 2007 joined al-Qaeda.

The GSPC's internationalization seems to have been the result of its obvious problems in keeping up its fight against the Algerian regime. These problems were accentuated by the Iraq war. From 2003, the organization had to cope with the increasing trend among young Algerians to travel to Iraq to fight the US rather than to join the fight against the Algerian government. It adopted an internationalist agenda partly to keep these potential recruits in Algeria. However, the coincidence of the first steps towards internationalization with the intensification of American and European counterterrorism cooperation is too obvious to ignore. By granting technological and logistical support to Algeria's security forces, the US government contributed to this move. The United States and its European allies became a target for the GSPC because they joined Algiers in its fight against the GSPC. Under the circumstances, it was only logical for the GSPC to seek closer contact with anti-American terrorists in Iraq and Pakistan. In fact, the GSPC's leader, Abu Musab Abdalwudud, confirmed this hypothesis in an interview with the *New York Times* in summer 2008 (Droukdal, 2008).

Whereas the GSPC was a purely Algerian organization with an Algerian agenda in 2001, international counterterrorism cooperation in North Africa and the Sahel contributed to its decision to adopt an internationalist agenda. This was the result of a misinterpretation of Jihadist terrorism. As in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia, Algerian Jihadism arose from a national

5. In October 2004, Zarqawi declared his allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and renamed his "Tawhid and Jihad Group" "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia." In December, bin Laden publicly accepted Zarqawi's oath of allegiance.

struggle against an authoritarian regime. By supporting the Algerian regime, the United States and Europe could expect short-term security gains, namely a weakening of the capabilities of the GSPC. At the same time, however, they strengthened those within the GSPC leadership who demanded an internationalization and thereby contributed to the creation of the monster that they claimed they were fighting. Any long-term counterterrorism strategy should focus on avoiding an authoritarian consolidation in the Middle East and instead motivate regimes in the region to embark on political reforms.

Towards a “Political Turn” in Countering Jihadist Terrorism

The fight against Jihadist terrorism will be decided in the Arab world. And if the West continues its current policies towards the region, it will perpetuate the problem rather than solve it. This does not necessarily mean that Jihadist movements will win. They are weak and lack mass support. However, no matter how stable regimes may be today in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria, if they do not change they will collapse sooner or later. Whether the successful revolutionaries will be Islamists, nationalists, democrats, or something else, they will oppose those who formerly supported their dictators. If the West continues to focus on security and stability, these dictatorships are very likely to provoke violent opposition for some time to come.

Reforms will reduce widespread sympathies for Jihadist movements

Only a thorough reform of political systems in the region will reduce internal conflicts and thereby opposition to repressive regimes. Only governments that integrate larger parts of the population into the decision-making process and offer venues in which to express grievances will be stable in the long run. Reforms might not end terrorist activities, but they will reduce widespread sympathies for these movements and will therefore reduce recruitment opportunities and logistical capabilities such that they will eventually render terrorist groups politically irrelevant. This is the dimension of the threat on which the international community should focus its counterterrorism measures.

Such a shift in American and European counterterrorism policies will require a change in paradigms: from security back to politics. While repressive measures are necessary in order to fight terrorists effectively, the far more important and difficult task remains to win over or at least neutralize their sympathizers. While the former is a short-term task, the latter is a long-term one.

The Bush administration was aware that 9/11 had its roots in Middle Eastern authoritarianism and that to solve the problems the regimes in the region had to change. It especially singled out Saudi Arabia and Egypt, its most powerful Arab allies, and American pressure led to some efforts at reform between 2003 and 2005. However, the American promotion of a democratic Middle East remained half-hearted and met with resistance from the regimes in question. Most importantly, the naive idea that the invasion of Iraq might serve as a starting point disqualified the project from the beginning. From 2005, it became clear that the Americans had failed in Iraq and that they needed the support of their pro-Western allies in the region in order to prepare for the future confrontation with Iran. In 2006, Washington had given up on democratization and instead tried to convince its Arab allies of the need to build an anti-Iranian alliance of "moderate" Arab states. Suddenly, the lessons of 9/11 had lost their former importance.

The new American administration is more likely than the outgoing one to listen to the advice of its partners, no matter whether Barack Obama or John McCain wins the election. But it will soon come under immense pressure to show tangible results, and political measures are not very likely to have any short-term effect. Nevertheless, the first months of the new American government might present the international community its only chance to influence the policies of al-Qaeda's enemy number one.

European nations should shoulder this task. Here, especially in Brussels, there is widespread awareness that the domestic situations in Middle Eastern countries have an impact on the development of Jihadist terrorism and that instability in the Arab world poses a direct threat to Europe. However, in Europe foreign policy concerning the region has been strongly influenced by the aforementioned "security paradigm." Counterterrorism cooperation between the respective security forces comes first, political reform second, if at all.

Arab states themselves flatly deny that authoritarianism is a root cause of Jihadist terrorism. They point instead to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Western foreign policy on the region in order to avoid addressing questions about their own domestic policies. Once the US gave up its democratization drive in 2005 and 2006, the Arab states consolidated their positions. Most importantly, the oil and gas exporters among them have profited from high energy prices, which have strengthened their position with regard to the US and Europe.

Therefore, any drive for political reform in the Arab world is unlikely to have immediate and important results. Nevertheless, reform is urgent because Jihadist terrorism has shown remarkable resilience and is likely to pose a threat for a number of years. A suitable strategy could be one in which the United States exerted pressure on its allies to persuade them to liberalize their political systems and allow for more political participation, while the Europeans offered enhanced cooperation. Both would have to intensify their efforts to convince these regimes that limited reform, most importantly regarding the rule of law, might in the long run stabilize their states. Even small progress could make a difference, for it would restore to the West some of the credibility with Arabs and Muslims it has lost since 9/11.



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