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Measuring the War on Terrorism: A First Appraisal

Daniel Byman

Scholars and pundits alike regularly opine that the United States is “winning” or “losing” the war on terrorism. Optimists point to successes such as a disrupted attack or arrested leader. Pessimists note continued Al Qaeda assaults or growing allied weariness. Unfortunately, for all the significant research that gauges military effectiveness, measures of counterterrorism efforts remain superficial and, in many cases, misleading.

On the surface, understanding progress in the war on terror might seem intuitive. If terrorists do not conduct attacks, and if they regularly are arrested or killed, all seems well. Yet counterterrorism is in fact difficult to assess. Unlike a conventional military campaign, a war on terrorism has no enemy capital to seize or industrial base to destroy. Even a terrorist organization that is divided and demoralized can lash out and kill many innocents.

Failure to identify proper measures has bedeviled past attempts to understand insurgency and conventional war. For example, ambiguities about the Vietcong order of battle—whether part-time combatants should be included, for instance—made it far more difficult to assess the guerrilla movement’s true strength. As much in a war against terrorists as against conventional enemies, inadequate measures of effectiveness can contribute to complacency, poor resource allocation, and terrible surprise.

Too often, efforts to gauge success amount to little more than body counts. In appearances before Congress, for example, FBI Director Robert Mueller, CIA Director George Tenet, and other senior officials have documented progress by emphasizing the number of arrests and disruptions of Al Qaeda members and associates. “We have charged over 200 suspected terrorists with crimes,” Mueller testified in March. “More than one-third of the top Al Qaeda leadership identified before the war has been captured or killed,” Tenet noted in February. President George W. Bush himself is said to keep a “scorecard” that notes which Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders have been killed or captured.

The problem with a body-count approach—however appealing as a concrete measure of success and failure—is that it easily misleads. First, a terrorist cadre’s total size often is unknown, and many of those killed or captured may be easily replaced by low-level recruits. Indeed, a terrorist group that loses members to arrest may actually increase in overall size if the crackdown generates a backlash. The Provisional Irish Republican Army, for example, capitalized on indiscriminate British crackdowns to gain recruits. Second, a body-count approach fails to provide an assessment of the adversary’s morale and its ability to recruit, fundraise, and conduct sophisticated attacks—all vital components of a successful counterterrorism campaign. Finally, the strength of a group and the success of its cause are related, but not identical. Terrorism in essence is a political strategy, and it can triumph even when it fails by strict operational measures. Defeating terrorism often requires larger strategies that aim beyond the group in question, affecting entire populations in a variety of ways.

Going beyond a body count to assess counterterrorism effectiveness can be a daunting task. Data often are scarce regarding clandestine groups and the sometimes classified or politically sensitive...
efforts to defeat them. Al Qaeda's financial resources flow from private donors, and many do not know the specific destination of their contributions. Even recruitment is difficult to quantify. There is no easy way to determine the size of some violent organizations, how well their affiliates and proxies are doing, or the number of their contributors, active supporters, and potential sympathizers. Other measures are highly subjective. Gauging Western military forces' morale or skill is hard enough; precise assessment of shadowy terrorist organizations is even harder. Nevertheless, the effort to measure counterterrorism more systematically is necessary to fight the terrorists more effectively.\(^1\)

**Counterterrorism or Counterinsurgency?**

A particularly difficult question when applying various measures to Al Qaeda is whether to categorize the group as a terrorist organization or an insurgency. Al Qaeda is clearly a terrorist group, but its activities go far beyond this narrow definition. Although it has committed episodic terrorist attacks against us assets, much of Al Qaeda's energy has gone into supporting Taliban guerrilla efforts; aiding insurgencies in the Balkans; the Caucasus, Kashmir, and elsewhere; and promoting its radical brand of Islam worldwide. Like many insurgencies, Al Qaeda has thousands of men under arms, tries to occupy territory, exploits areas where government control is lax, and seeks to inspire and direct a mass movement. As such, Al Qaeda is probably best defined as a religiously inspired, global insurgent movement that often uses terrorist tactics.

The measures used for counterinsurgency, however, may differ considerably from those relevant to counterterrorism. Insurgencies often wage guerrilla war, hold territory, have a wider support base, and otherwise differ in nature and scope from smaller terrorist groups, which often have limited support from their host populations. Defeating an insurgency through arrests, for example, is particularly difficult. Recognizing the insurgent nature of Al Qaeda is vital to designing the best strategy to defeat it.

**How to gauge a strategy**

A state's counterterrorism strategy mirrors imperfectly the goals and objectives of terrorists. A state that can deny a terrorist group the ability to organize, conduct operations, gain support at home and overseas, and spread its ideology, has gone a long way toward success.\(^2\) Cracking a group's ability to organize and recruit, for example, pays huge dividends. If a government can promote internal dissent or make group members more able or willing to leave, it can often achieve its goals more effectively than through arrests or targeted killings. Similarly, efforts to target terrorist logistics— an often ignored vulnerability— may bear considerable fruit. Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan argued in the spring 2003 issue of Survival that the French government's shift in the 1990s from targeting only operations to uprooting fundraising and recruitment networks greatly advanced the counterterrorism campaign against Islamist groups.

But defining a state's goals solely in opposition to a terrorist group's needs ignores the ways in which a state can improve its performance. Assessments of state effectiveness may be broken down into four categories: organization, intelligence, support, and defense.\(^3\)

**Organization**

To fight terrorism successfully, a state must have both a suitable strategy and the organizational capacity to implement it effectively. Declaring the need for a strategy is easy, but describing its contours is difficult. Given the variety of terrorist groups, as well as variation between and within states, an ideal strategy must be both group- and time-specific in its particulars. It must include the ability to hinder terrorist group operations, to penetrate the group and reduce its membership, and to deter or otherwise reduce recruitment. It also must include steps to counter radical ideology and to

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\(^1\)The author discussed some of the points raised in this article in “Scoring the War on Terrorism,” The National Interest (summer 2003).

\(^2\)Several overlapping factors make terrorist groups more likely to survive and prosper—and thus contribute to a state's success or failure in suppressing them. These include organizational requirements, operational demands, popular support, and ideological needs. Not included in this list are psychological factors that motivate individuals to join radical groups. The range of psychological factors across terrorist groups is too great for any analytic use (although some factors may predispose individuals to join certain types of groups). As Bruce Hoffman notes, terrorists are “disturbingly normal.”

undercut popular and international support for the terrorist organization.

To have an impact, a strategy must be coherent, organized, and reflected in the state's institutions. Many governments issue papers or otherwise present a strategy without fully sharing it among different parts of a bureaucracy. In France, for example, counterterrorism was uncoordinated and ineffective until legislation in 1986 created new bureaucratic organs—including positions in the judiciary—that specialized in terrorism. Like terrorist groups, moreover, a state's strategy must be flexible and innovative. Terrorism will change in response to an effective strategy, and the strategy must change in turn.

Nations do not shape strategy in a vacuum. Effective strategy is shaped by leaders who impose it on recalcitrant members of the bureaucracy and ensure its coordination. In addition to building institutional support, leaders must also help shape public opinion to ensure popular support for counterterrorism in general and the strategy in particular. Political leaders must also give counterterrorism appropriate priority, making concessions on other objectives as necessary.

Intelligence

Intelligence is the sine qua non of counterterrorism. As terrorism specialist Gordon McCormick has noted, the state has an information disadvantage but a force advantage—if it can locate the terrorists, it can usually arrest or kill them. More generally, understanding the terrorists' motivations, organizational structure, and limitations can help counter the threat or defend against it. If particular information can be gained on specific operations, they can more easily be disrupted or defended against. Obtaining intelligence on a state's own weaknesses is also vital. Often a country's vulnerability to a particular type of attack is clear only in hindsight, reducing the chances of effective defense.

Successful intelligence gathering requires a mix of restraint and aggressiveness. Too gentle an approach may fail to elicit the necessary information. As Rand terrorism specialist Bruce Hoffman has observed, intelligence is often gathered from informers, interrogation, and other methods, many of which are harsh. However, too aggressive a response may in effect boost a radical cause. Hoffman also notes that widespread brutality, such as the French repression of the FLN in Algeria during that country's war of independence, can push undecided individuals into the arms of terrorist organizations.

Acquiring intelligence also requires imagination and flexibility. Hoffman and Jennifer Taw argue in A Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Insurgency that lenient rather than harsh legislation can often lead to successful outcomes. One of the most impressive intelligence successes in the history of counterterrorism was the Italian government's use of a "repentant" law to undermine the Red Brigades. Imprisoned or accused terrorists who informed on their brethren provided a massive amount of information and fomented dissension within the Red Brigades' ranks.

Support

Support, from a government's point of view, goes beyond denying a terrorist group backing from the population or outside powers. The presence or absence of popular support for a state's counterterrorism campaign also has tremendous implications. The most basic measure is the breadth of support: if an overwhelming majority of the population backs the counterterrorism effort, the government likely will have sufficient resources in its struggle, and the terrorists will enjoy fewer adherents.

Also important is support for counterterrorism methods. Elements of a strategy, such as detentions or assassinations, may prove unpopular, as might indefinite detentions. In many societies—particularly democracies—lack of robust support may effectively remove certain counterterrorism instruments from a state's arsenal.

Related to support is the willingness to suffer casualties. Terrorists often seek to impose unacceptable costs on a state, forcing it to back down at the prospect of unending bloodshed. If the population will endure casualties, this basic tactic is not likely to succeed.

Vital, too, is popular flexibility with regard to concessions that might undercut support for the terrorists. At times, a few concessions may take the wind out of terrorists' sails, reducing support for their cause to only the most hardcore members. Some groups turn to terrorism because other methods fail to achieve their objectives; allowing them to achieve success on some of their demands may reduce their propensity for violence. For example, an ethnonationalist group seeking independence might lose support if a state makes concessions on language or limited autonomy. Many governments,
however, lack flexibility, since concessions would be criticized as a sign of weakness.

Concessions in any case often fail because the correlation between a group’s progress toward its objectives through peaceful means and its move away from violence is often limited. The feared and highly motivated Liberation Tigers in Sri Lanka have agreed to a cease-fire in exchange for concessions by the government that fall short of autonomy. In contrast, even after the death of Franco and numerous concessions by the successor republican government, the Basque ETA has continued, and indeed increased, its violence in Spain.

International support for the counterterrorism effort is also vital. This support generally increases domestic support for counterterrorism efforts. Enlisting the backing and assistance of international partners often solidifies domestic public opinion in favor of forceful government policy. International support lends legitimacy to a political leadership’s claims that its operation has a moral purpose. International support can be critical to operational success, providing additional intelligence and reach as terrorists (even domestic ones) increasingly cross borders. Most important, international support undercuts the myriad benefits that a terrorist group gains from having an active or passive state sponsor.

Defenses

Counterterrorism, though it tends to focus on offense, also requires a range of defensive measures. Defenses limit terrorists’ options, making it more difficult and risky for them to strike. Gauging defenses is an art in itself. Basic measures include whether defenses are robust enough to prevent or significantly reduce the number of certain types of attacks (airline hijackings, for example). Other types of defenses can reduce the casualties and damage that attacks inflict, even if they do not completely prevent the attacks. For example, installing blast-proof windows at critical facilities will not stop a car bomb, but they will reduce the number of casualties from shards of flying glass.

THE WAR AGAINST AL QAEDA

The United States has battled Al Qaeda since the mid-1990s, with the effort stepping up considerably after the August 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. The response to the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon ushered in a new era, making the struggle against Al Qaeda one of the most important issues in American foreign policy.

How goes this war? Both Al Qaeda and the United States can claim some degree of success. In general, Al Qaeda has suffered operationally, but its broader support remains strong. The United States has greatly improved its ability to target Al Qaeda, yet gaps remain.

Al Qaeda as an organization has suffered, but the long-term health of its cause appears strong. After the 9-11 attacks, the United States and its allies engaged in a worldwide campaign of arrests and disruptions, including detention of more than 3,000 suspected operatives. Many of the elite Al Qaeda members who swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden were detained or killed. The United States or other governments captured a number of Al Qaeda senior lieutenants, such as Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Abu Zubayda. Control over the Al Qaeda network, which includes potential rivals, probably fell as its ability to operate openly declined.

That said, Al Qaeda and its affiliates are in no danger of collapse. It has always attracted highly skilled, motivated, and experienced operatives. Fundraising remains robust, and the organization appears able to attract new recruits. In addition, many members of its senior leadership, including bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain active. Their very survival in the face of a worldwide manhunt represents a form of victory, demonstrating successful defiance of America and its allies. Al Qaeda has suffered few defections, despite considerable incentives to leave the group.

Al Qaeda’s ability to conduct operations has suffered considerably since 9-11. A steady stream of arrests and disruptions has reduced its operational security and hindered its reach, as cells throughout the world have been broken up or forced further underground. In addition, the group has not carried out a true terrorism “spectacular”—a bloody attack against a difficult target—since 9-11. Al Qaeda’s continuing threats to undertake such massive attacks suggest that its plans have been thwarted or that these threats instead serve propaganda purposes, even if not fulfilled.

Nevertheless, the group remains a dangerous organization—and extremely active. Al Qaeda in the past two years has planned or been implicated in attacks in Tunisia, Chechnya, Pakistan, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Morocco. Several of these attacks led to considerable bloodshed (particularly the Bali discotheque bombing in 2002), while the attack earlier this year in Saudi Arabia was on relatively well-guarded targets. The group’s unsuccessful use of a surface-to-air missile
against a commercial airliner in Kenya suggests that its ability to innovate is still strong. The sheer range of its operations indicates that its reach and ability to collect information for targeting, while perhaps diminished, remains considerable.

Al Qaeda’s ideology is still potent, and its appeal may even have grown since 9-11. Increasingly, elements of Al Qaeda’s worldview—that the United States seeks to subjugate the Muslim world, that Washington represents a greater enemy than local repressive governments, and that the struggle is epochal and civilizational—are gaining support. Violent jihad as the answer to the Muslim world’s problems appears more attractive than in the past. In addition, Al Qaeda has shown flexibility in calling for jihad against American soldiers in Iraq, despite the movement’s loathing of Saddam Hussein’s regime, and it continues to try to capitalize on Israeli-Palestinian violence. Indicative of this flexibility, bin Laden has called for “using every good as well as sinful person” as part of the struggle.

Al Qaeda has made some progress in gaining militant and popular support in the Muslim world. The 9-11 attacks and the US response have made Al Qaeda the world’s premier resistance movement to America while demonstrating the group’s remarkable ability to inflict pain—attractive characteristics for Muslim militants. In addition, Al Qaeda’s propaganda against US hegemony, particularly in the aftermath of the unpopular war and occupation of Iraq, has given the movement additional legitimacy in much of the region. Polls taken by the Pew Charitable Trusts after the Saddam regime fell indicated that “people in most predominantly Muslim countries remain overwhelmingly opposed to the United States, and in several cases these negative feelings have increased dramatically.”

Among the greatest blows Al Qaeda has suffered is its loss of a haven in Afghanistan, along with passive support from Pakistan and a permissive environment in much of the world. The loss of Afghanistan was devastating, denying the movement a safe place in which to organize, recruit, and train. Islamabad’s turn toward the United States after 9-11 helped produce some of the greatest successes against Al Qaeda, such as the arrest of Khalid Sheik Mohammed. Equally important has been the aggressive campaign conducted by governments in Europe and Asia, which makes it far harder for the organization to recruit and operate. Al Qaeda may operate today as a “virtual network,” but this is less dangerous than a real network.

**AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

Since 9-11, the United States has made considerable progress developing institutions to fight terrorism, but its overall strategy remains unclear. It has engaged in a massive bureaucratic reorganization, creating the Department of Homeland Security to decrease the chances of another successful terrorist attack on American soil. In addition, the FBI has undergone many changes designed to make it more effective in preempting future terrorist attacks. All major foreign policy institutions now see counterterrorism as one of their top missions.

Yet, despite the Bush administration’s attempts to articulate a counterterrorism strategy through various national security documents, it is not clear whether the more strategic elements are being implemented throughout the government. Notably, there are few efforts to address terrorist recruiting and to undermine Al Qaeda’s ideology. Efforts to reduce its support in the Muslim world through development and public diplomacy are underfunded and disorganized. In October, a government advisory group chaired by former Ambassador Edward Djerejian found that US public diplomacy “has become outmoded, lacking both strategic direction and resources.”

Intelligence has blossomed. The massive number of arrests and detentions, as well as the huge increase in the number of analysts working on Al Qaeda and Islamic radicalism, has greatly improved understanding of the threat. In addition, vulnerability assessments are beginning to identify weaknesses at home that terrorists might exploit. So far, the US government has been aggressive in using renditions and detentions to gain information, but has not engaged in mass arrests or other measures that might provoke a widespread backlash. Creativity and flexibility, however, at times appear to be lacking. Siobhan Gorman, for example, noted in the August 2 issue of National Journal that the FBI continues to focus on prosecuting suspected radicals rather than seizing opportunities to penetrate the network as a whole.

Popular support for counterterrorism efforts appears deep. The Bush administration enjoys widespread backing for many of its methods, with much of the population favoring even stronger
measures to fight terrorism. International support for the effort against Al Qaeda remains robust, despite problems in bilateral relations stemming from the war with Iraq.

The weakest aspect of the US response so far is in the installation of proper defenses. It took almost a year to establish the Homeland Security Department, which remains mired in bureaucratic infighting and chaos. The Bush administration has emphasized offensive operations, leading critics to charge that it has not devoted proper attention to securing the homeland. As Rand Beers, a former senior aide to President Bush, notes: “The difficult, long-term issues both at home and abroad have been avoided, neglected or shortchanged and generally underfunded.”

It is clear that the struggle against terrorism has made progress and Al Qaeda has suffered setbacks. Nevertheless, the United States has a long way to go. To understand whether America is triumphing in its war on terrorism, it is first essential to know what victory would mean. Too narrow a definition, such as the number of arrests or prosecutions, fails to grasp completely the Al Qaeda threat. Measures must also take into account Al Qaeda’s ability to gain new recruits, raise money, find new havens, or otherwise sustain its worldwide campaign.

Lacking systematic measures of its counterterrorism effort, US officials risk missing important arenas in the overall struggle. They also may fail to ask the necessary hard questions about why certain efforts bear fruit while others do not. This is not to suggest that America’s counterterrorism policy is necessarily failing. Indeed, since 9-11 the United States has scored numerous successes, many of which have proved devastating to Al Qaeda. Even so, policy makers must think more broadly as America and its allies move from the immediate response to the September 11 attacks to a long-term, perhaps generational struggle against Al Qaeda and its ideology.

With this wider perspective in mind, nebulous areas such as public diplomacy in the Muslim world, the success of nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the quality of homeland defense will rightly become central to the overall debate on how well the war on terrorism is going. These broader measures often are more difficult to analyze and weigh, but long-term success requires recognition of their role.