

## Rethinking Transnational Counterterrorism: Beyond a National Framework

Recent political debate surrounding the war on terrorism has centered on evaluating the Bush administration's performance. That worthy debate, however, tends to obscure the more fundamental question: what can the United States hope to accomplish in the global war on terrorism? To answer that broader query, policymakers and analysts need to think more deeply about the prospects for successfully confronting transnational terrorist organizations, because these groups, such as al Qaeda, are different from national groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or Hamas, on which so much discussion and research is based.

When the United States has talked about terrorist organizations other than al Qaeda, U.S. officials have tended to blur the line between national and transnational ones, often lumping them together as part of the same global war on terrorism. In the summer of 2006 during the Israel-Hizballah war, for example, President George W. Bush linked Hizballah to wider terrorist currents: "The terrorists will do anything to achieve objectives. They went into London subways, they'll fire rockets into Israel, all aiming to disrupt, to destroy, to prevent free societies from flourishing, because they don't agree with freedom."<sup>1</sup> In 2006 a section of the National Security Strategy focused on defeating al Qaeda but, as part of achieving that objective, suggested confronting the allies of terrorism, Iran and Syria. Yet, Iran and Syria primarily provide support to Hamas, Hizballah, and, in the case of Iran, Iraqi Shi'a militias, not al Qaeda.

The Bush strategy relies heavily on deterring potential adversaries through the application and threatened use of force. The administration has argued that a forceful U.S. response, which they believed had been so lacking in

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Jeremy Pressman is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Connecticut. He may be reached at [jeremy.pressman@uconn.edu](mailto:jeremy.pressman@uconn.edu).

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the 1990s, will prevent future challenges against the United States. As Vice President Dick Cheney explained, a “strong, firm U.S. response to terror and to threats to the United States would go a long way, frankly, towards calming things in [the Middle East].”<sup>2</sup> The strategy is based both on offensive action and deterrence. Offensive action against a handful of adversaries in Afghanistan and then Iraq would teach a lesson to would-be adversaries elsewhere. If the United States defeated a few enemies, others would be deterred. Unfortunately, many policies that might be successful against national terrorist organizations, such as sanctions or deterrence, are not as useful in the transnational context, presenting a problem for their use in the global war on terrorism.

## **Defining the Enemy**

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The distinction between national and transnational terrorist groups largely stems from a fundamental difference in geographic scope: transnational terrorist objectives are not tied to a single state. Although national organizations are not easy to tame or defeat, the range of options is even more circumscribed in dealing with transnational ones because their agendas and fields of play are much larger.

National organizations may use the world as a stage, as Palestinian terrorist organizations have done, but their objectives are defined by a national territorial home, as in the case of the IRA in Ireland, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Palestine, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. If the national territorial home disappeared, the organization would lose its *raison d'être*.

Contrast that with al Qaeda or any worldwide movement. These groups are not bound by any one country, and they aspire to have a regional, if not global, impact. Al Qaeda would like to topple regimes across the Middle East as well as send home the world's lone superpower, the United States. These transnational groups may be based in many countries, whether simultaneously or moving from one to the next. A non-national group could operate in North America, Europe, East Asia, and increasingly in cities around the world; it could coordinate and launch attacks from almost anywhere. Technological advances, especially the low cost of communications and transportation, have opened up many new avenues for clandestine operators. These changes empower the individual or small groups. At the same time, plenty of weak governments with only a tenuous hold on their territory are situated around the globe. Failed states and other gray zones offer additional spaces and opportunities for transnational terrorist organizations.

Globalizing forces are seen at work in the leadership of al Qaeda's core group, even leaving aside the many organizations inspired by or loosely affili-

ated with it. Al Qaeda is led by a Saudi, Osama bin Laden, with an Egyptian, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as the second in command. Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, a key planner of the September 11, 2001, attacks and others, is Pakistani. The late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al Qaeda in the Iraqi theater, was Jordanian.

Because transnational organizations are networked and distributed, they are less hierarchical and can survive without central command and control. Analysts Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin have called them “non-group groups.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Daniel Byman suggested that bin Laden’s world view of confronting the United States and legitimizing violent attacks “has gained remarkable currency.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, shutting down al Qaeda in Afghanistan does not shut down al Qaeda, especially now that it has an established track record in the international arena of successfully attacking the United States.

Fundraising, recruitment, indoctrination, and training may take place in many countries simultaneously for transnational groups. New locales such as Iraq or the tribal regions of Pakistan can replace old bases of operation such as Afghanistan. Britons travel to Pakistan for inspiration and perhaps guidance and training. Militants train in Iraq and then head to Algeria, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia for operations. Iraq has emerged as the latest training ground, as Barry Posen explains: “Indeed, the [United States] has inadvertently created in Anbar a Darwinian school for insurgents and terrorists. They learn from fighting the U.S. Marine Corps; the best fighters survive to train others; the techniques are honed all the time; and they are spread throughout Iraq.”<sup>5</sup>

Globalization, technological change, and the growth of institutional and informal interactions across international borders have created fertile ground for many kinds of transnational activity. Transnational terrorists draw on some of the same processes, such as the growing ease of communications and travel, which allow farmers, environmentalists, or trade unionists to resist international financial institutions, multinational corporations, or political hegemony. These abstract global processes manifest themselves in everyday technology such as cell phones, laptop computers, e-mail, and Web sites. What is clearly different from other protestors is how the terrorist organizations choose to utilize the new technologies and linkages.<sup>6</sup>

The cyber-attacks against Estonian Web sites in April–May 2007 provide a recent example of this transnational phenomenon. In the initial stages, the identity of the attackers was unknown, although clearly computers around the world were being used, often unwittingly, to attack. If the attacks in Estonia

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were the work only of Russians in Russia, Estonia, and perhaps elsewhere, it would be an example of a national group using transnational means. If the Russians were joined by hackers and other malicious computer thrill-seekers from around the world, however, the case becomes one of a transnational group using transnational means.

**T**ransnational terrorist organizations render sanctions somewhat irrelevant.

Although these transnational means are also available to national terrorist organizations, national networks are less likely to seek mass casualty attacks or employ weapons of mass destruction. They are tied to one territorial unit and would be wary of causing mass destruction to that territory. If ETA exploded a nuclear bomb in Spain, for example, the nuclear fallout would likely affect the Basque

region as well as the target. National organizations that seek to capture the central state have even less leeway than secessionist movements such as ETA. The PLO, for example, could not poison Jerusalem, and the IRA could not use weapons of mass destruction in Belfast.

Furthermore, in the past most national organizations limited the type of violence used to attract political support from third parties rather than alienate them. National organizations want help in their cause in order to pressure their state adversary. It is difficult to imagine transnational terrorists warning police of a bomb, as the IRA often did in London. A bomb with minimal or no casualties could draw attention to the group and demonstrate its coercive potential without evoking sympathy for victims and thereby provoking a public backlash. Even when national organizations moved to a wider geographic scope, such as the PLO's international terrorism of the 1970s, the fact that they were seeking international political support conditioned the nature of their operations.

In contrast, al Qaeda could destroy Washington or another major target without physically harming its support and membership base because their battles do not take place in confined geographic and demographic spaces. On September 11, 2001, al Qaeda leveled the World Trade Center without fear of harming its own supporters and with the hope that the United States would think twice about remaining engaged in the Middle East. To some extent, transnational groups lack a territory populated by civilians that is vulnerable to counterattack. They thus can be more reckless. For this reason, moreover, the danger of an escalatory spiral is high, as they seek both to provoke counterattacks and to prove that great powers are vulnerable. They are playing to many audiences across many countries, some of whom they want to antagonize. They can afford to alienate some third parties and to wreak havoc on

some territories. Al Qaeda welcomed being defined as enemy number one of the world's only superpower. This designation has brought problems and U.S. attacks, but it has also brought prestige, widespread media coverage, new recruits, and funding.

Whereas geography shapes many transnational-national differences, factors such as ideology and state sponsorship are less meaningful in differentiating between the two types of terrorist groups. First, either type may embrace an extreme ideology. Many Israelis, for example, see Hamas as quite radical. "Extreme" is often associated with the use of violence and the pursuit of seemingly unattainable goals; both aspects may be linked either to national or transnational organizations.

Second, either may seek state sponsorship, although transnational organizations could survive and adapt more easily if they lose state support. The idea that national organizations would not adapt easily is difficult to prove definitively, but some cases are suggestive. Hizballah's military capabilities and position vis-à-vis Israel, for example, would be greatly diminished if Iran and Syria cut off shipments of missiles and other arms. National terrorist groups would still have grievances, but their capabilities for action would be weaker. Turning to a transnational example, al Qaeda was dealt a setback when the Taliban government in Afghanistan was ousted by U.S.-led forces in late 2001. Although the Taliban have made a partial comeback, al Qaeda has also come to rely on supportive elements in Pakistan. Despite this need to adapt, today's modified al Qaeda is arguably as strong or stronger than it was pre-September 11. This ability to adapt mitigates many potential policies that squeeze sponsoring or host states.

## Policy Implications

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Transnational terrorism's adaptability calls for a reexamination of U.S. counterterrorism policies. The standard tools of sanctions, negotiations, democratization, poverty remediation, and deterrence decrease in value when their target is not limited to a single state.

Sanctions generally aim to curtail the financial and commercial flows of the state sponsoring or harboring terrorism. Over the past few decades, much U.S. counterterrorism legislation has been directed against state sponsors. The Export Administration Act of 1979, for example, bars aid to those countries on the U.S. terrorism list. Transnational terrorist organizations render this tool somewhat irrelevant. It is still costly for transnational organizations to adjust, as with al Qaeda when it lost its Taliban sponsor in Afghanistan in 2001–2002, so pressuring their allies is not meaningless. Yet, transnational groups' adaptation is neither implausible nor prohibitively costly.

**Negotiations also are not an option because the transnational goal is so expansive.**

On a related note, some countries in which transnational terrorists operate may have both helpful and adversarial factions, complicating a decision to sanction. The United States is working with the Pakistani government, for example, even as elements of that government and of nongovernmental groups in Pakistan facilitate the presence of al Qaeda leaders and members

in Pakistan. Washington can hardly afford to break with Islamabad given its crucial importance in the war against terrorism. Yet, the Pakistani government fears being seen as merely an American stooge. Because of these tricky domestic politics, it has chosen not to crack down on allies of al Qaeda to the degree the United States would like. In theory, transnational groups may also be aware of bureaucratic schisms or the potential for such splits

and try to use them to their advantage, seeking out organizations or agencies that share their concerns.

Some sanctions do focus on organizations rather than governments. The United States maintains a list of foreign terrorist organizations subject to financial and travel restrictions. The list includes groups such as Aum Shinrikyo, ETA, Hamas, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and al Qaeda. For these sanctions to be effective, the organization has to be structurally coherent and make some explicit use of regular economic markets. If an organization became so fractured that its actions seemed like the activity of individuals or its activities were already part of the black market, sanctions would be less likely to work. It appears, for example, that many of the Britons involved in attacks in 2005 and 2007 in the United Kingdom were either not on anyone's radar screen or were just on the edge of counterterrorism efforts. If governments do not know of such individuals' or groups' activities, they certainly cannot enforce sanctions.

Negotiations are not an option because the transnational goal is so expansive. The objectives of such groups are so broad that the national governments would have to agree to incredibly extensive and unlikely concessions. Al Qaeda seeks a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East, for example, but it is incredibly difficult to imagine that any U.S. administration would concede, given its interests in the region and those of its allies.<sup>7</sup> Bush has often made this very point: "[W]e're not facing a set of grievances that can be soothed and addressed. We're facing a radical ideology with inalterable objectives: to enslave whole nations and intimidate the world. No act of ours invited the rage of the killers—and no concession, bribe, or act of appeasement would change or limit their plans for murder."<sup>8</sup>

That is not to say that negotiations with national organizations are easy or that the division between national and transnational on the negotiations issue is absolute. Some domestic actors will argue that national terrorist organizations are pushing for unfathomable concessions on fundamental issues. At the same time, national organizations are often pushing for divisible assets, such as a piece of territory or a share of government rather than the entire territory, political dominance, or complete ideological victory. The original goal of a national organization may not lend itself to compromise, but further amendments to that goal over time could lead in the direction of a compromise acceptable to both sides.

This dynamic in national organizations is clearly demonstrated in the Israeli-Palestinian case. Israelis have balked at PLO demands for the implementation of the Palestinian right of return if that means the Palestinian refugees have the automatic right to settle in Israel. Most Israelis see that as an existential threat. The entrance of millions of Palestinian refugees into Israel would undermine, if not destroy, Israel as a Jewish state. Many Israelis, however, would accept a Palestinian state in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, even though that would require an Israeli territorial withdrawal from close to 22 percent of the land that is today Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. Israel offered one version of such a state in 2000–2001. In short, the PLO's refugee demand is seen as altering the very definition of Israel whereas an amended territorial withdrawal is seen as a feasible concession.

Transnational groups' provocative and deadly tactics also complicate the response of their targets because domestic politics reduce the room for maneuverability. The scale and symbolism of their attacks create domestic pressure for a major response. After the September 11 attacks, Bush could hardly have taken a low-key response against al Qaeda.

A third approach to national terrorist organizations has been to reformulate the society from which the terrorists are drawn by improving its political or socioeconomic structure. The aim is to reduce support for terrorist organizations by opening up and democratizing the political system or by alleviating poverty. Even if these strategies are effective, which some scholars doubt, one would need to improve many countries to respond to transnational terrorists, in a world in which improving just one is difficult.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, supporters of transnational groups are ideologically, rather than materially, motivated. National terrorist movements may, on the other hand, provide goods and services to build a base of support. Hamas has a large social welfare network that helps its existing members and draws in new ones. Transnational terrorists cannot "buy" support as easily, as their diffuse and noninstitutionalized nature makes such a network unlikely.

The absence of material incentives also makes transnational members difficult to deter. They will not become disaffected due to material loss or the

threat of material loss or destruction. Al Qaeda leaders on the run have probably survived with limited comforts. The leaders want power and the victory of their ideology more than they want material gains. Although an ideology could arise that was dedicated to the pursuit of material gain or that at least saw that as a positive by-product of its other aims, this is not the case with the enemy the United States currently faces.

Transnational groups' lack of ties to a single territorial unit only compounds the difficulty in deterring them. They may have few concerns about bringing a destructive response down onto the heads of their hosts, being able as they are to shift their operations anywhere, be it another failed state or a modern metropolis with high technology and urban anonymity.

The limited value of economic sanctions, negotiations, poverty alleviation, democratization, and deterrence in combating transnational terrorists leaves few options. Policymakers can go on the offensive against transnational terrorists, as the United States has done with al Qaeda, but they do not have ways of reducing the grievances, civilian casualties, and property destruction highlighted by the transnational terrorists and thus, for many, the motivation for joining in the first place. Consequently, such an offensive strategy by default actually can backfire, producing counterproductive sympathies that help transnational networks recruit more members.

Ideologically motivated transnational terrorism is not easy to root out, and as a result, "the United States and other countries ... will therefore be forced to play defence against religious terrorism for some time to come. They will have to hope that broader historical developments will begin to ameliorate, rather than inflame, the grievances behind the new terrorism."<sup>10</sup> Even if broader historical developments transform religious terrorism, a new group could arise that embraces the same means that al Qaeda has used so successfully but is motivated by a different ideological agenda. Although the present U.S. focus on al Qaeda may lead some observers to think in religious terms, transnational terrorist organizations need not be religiously motivated by definition. One could plug in a number of antisystemic or antisuperpower ideologies, such as anarchism, neo-Marxism, or radical environmentalism, that could use the same means of resistance and confrontation with a motivation other than religion. Even if political Islam loses its appeal, the transnational terrorist model is still viable.

### **Adjusting Expectations**

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On September 20, 2001, Bush predicted "a lengthy campaign" that would "not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."<sup>11</sup> Such a goal, to state the obvious, is politically more popular

than claiming the objective is to limit the damage from al Qaeda and fight a lengthy war of attrition. Yet, given the intricate nature of the enemy, refining public expectations in the United States is necessary for any measure of success to be achieved.

A complete victory is unlikely in the short term, but counterterrorism advances are possible, if fleeting. The idea of a “long war,” a term favored by some U.S. officials, begins to get at this notion.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps an even better way of thinking is a war of attrition, of constant friction and skirmishes. Less technically speaking, the fight may end up looking like a game of whack-a-mole. Rather than outright victory, the best that countries countering transnational terrorists may hope for is to keep the terrorists off-balance and in constant need of repair, replenishment, and rebuilding. An ideology with mass regional or global appeal is difficult to will out of existence.

Such an understanding of the conflict reinforces the need for close cooperation with allies. Long, hard-fought confrontations with transnational terrorists across several continents mean that advantages in firepower and high-tech weaponry are insufficient. Even with national terrorists, these advantages are of limited value when compared to conventional war situations, and the disparity becomes even greater against transnational terrorists operating underground in multiple countries. The United States cannot be everywhere and see everything. Al Qaeda and the like are informal coalitions of like-minded individuals and groups from multiple countries. Effectively combating and tracking them requires similar cultural and national diversity in the counterterrorism coalition.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld emphasized that “the mission will determine the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission.”<sup>13</sup> If the mission changed, so would the coalition. Establishing permanent alliances that cut across issue areas was an old way of thinking. For the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example, the United States built a “coalition of the willing,” those countries who allegedly shared U.S. objectives and were willing to contribute something to the force. Yet, allies need to share intelligence as well as cultural and linguistic knowledge. Ad-hoc coalitions may stymie efforts to build long-term relationships that lead to the exchange of vital information and to small counterterrorism operations.

One could counter the long-war framework with the assertion that a determined focus on a transnational terrorist organization could lead to more lasting success. What if the United States had focused all its resources on al Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks and neither

**An offensive response can backfire, helping transnational networks recruit.**

lost focus and diverted assets to the war in Iraq nor lost allied support as a result? It is reasonable to assume that al Qaeda would not be as strong as it is today.

Yet, by September 11, 2001, al Qaeda was already well established. The events of that day and the strategy behind it created a clear model for other would-be terrorists. Even a few fragments of a mostly defeated al Qaeda, combined with a tiny fraction of the many America-haters around the world, could have maintained the confrontation. Killing the top leaders of al Qaeda is not enough to stop the wider movement. Quashing the idea, what analyst Daniel Byman calls bin Laden's worldview, is extremely difficult because it has been observed and articulated by others. By defining the target (the United States), the means (violence with symbolic im-

plications), and the alternative objective (true Islamic control of Islamic lands free from colonial interference), bin Laden and al Qaeda left a formula for others to follow. As the United States has stumbled badly in Iraq, the appeal of that recipe has only grown.

**Refining U.S. public expectations is necessary for any measure of success to be achieved.**

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### **Time to Rethink the Offensive**

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Relying on counterterrorism policies not well suited to combating a transnational threat is more than just an obstacle to victory. It could actually make the problem worse if al Qaeda or others in the future bait the United States and provoke collateral damage, both human and otherwise. U.S. policymakers need an updated policy framework based on relevant experiences with transnational terrorist groups.

Such a framework might consider deterrence in a far more nuanced fashion.<sup>14</sup> In practice, it would highlight the importance of allies and be wary of unilateralist policies that alienate them as well as competing U.S. interests, such as democracy or nuclear nonproliferation, which might undermine ties to particular allies whose cooperation is needed to fight terrorism.

Whatever framework might emerge, the coming year is a propitious time to reassess U.S. strategy and tactics to date. A new administration will start in January 2009, and the new president will have the opportunity to chart a different course on counterterrorism, implementing new strategies that recognize these differences between national and transnational terrorist organizations.

## Notes

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