
Are We Winning the War on Terror?

Max Boot

On balance, we are doing pretty well. Near strategic defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq. Near strategic defeat for al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Significant setbacks for al Qaeda globally—and here I'm going to use the word “ideologically”—as a lot of the Islamic world pushes back on their form of Islam.

THUS SPOKE CIA Director Michael Hayden in an interview with the *Washington Post* published on May 30 under the headline, “U.S. Cites Big Gains Against al Qaeda.”

Hayden's upbeat assessment is shared by a surprising number of analysts who have written recently about al Qaeda's decline and possible fall, including Fareed Zakaria in *Newsweek*, David Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, Lawrence Wright in the *New Yorker*, Peter Bergen and Paul Cruikshank in the *New Republic*, former CIA analyst Marc Sageman in a new book, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century*, and Michael Sheehan, a former New York Police Department counterterrorism chief, in *Crush the Cell: How to Defeat Terrorism Without Terrorizing Ourselves*.

There is much evidence to support their optimistic conclusions—certainly more evidence than

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there was to support the previous conventional wisdom, propounded by many of these same writers not so long ago, that the American-led invasion of Iraq was a great gift to al Qaeda and that as a result we were losing the global war on terror. (Bergen, for instance, published an article just last fall entitled, “War of Error: How Osama bin Laden Beat George W. Bush.”)

It turns out that, far from emerging victorious, al Qaeda in Iraq has been driven out of its erstwhile strongholds in Anbar, Baghdad, and Diyala provinces. Its last refuge is in the northern city of Mosul, and even there, thanks to a joint Iraqi-American offensive, attacks were cut in half during the month of May. From Basra to Baghdad, Shiite terrorists loosely affiliated with Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army are also in retreat, thanks primarily to the operations of the Iraqi security forces under the direction of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Outside of Iraq and Afghanistan, al Qaeda has not managed to mount any major attacks on an American target, much less on the American homeland, since 9/11. Those attacks that have succeeded have been fairly minor compared with past al-Qaeda atrocities: a 2004 assault on the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, killed five local employees and no Americans.

There is good reason to think that al Qaeda is still reeling from the blows it suffered in the aftermath of 9/11. As Wright notes, “nearly 80 percent of al Qaeda's members in Afghanistan were killed in

the final months of 2001," and since then more have been killed or captured in countries ranging from Yemen and Pakistan to Spain and Indonesia. In his *Washington Post* interview, Hayden mentioned that since the beginning of this year alone, "al Qaeda's global leadership has lost three senior officers, including two who succumbed 'to violence,' an apparent reference to Predator strikes that killed terrorist leaders Abu Laith al-Libi and Abu Sulayman al-Jazairi in Pakistan." In an effort to avoid a similar fate, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the top leaders, have gone into progressively deeper hiding, probably in the rugged tribal areas of western Pakistan. This has kept them alive and free but made it difficult for them to communicate with their followers or guide their efforts.

THE THINNING of its ranks and the loss of central direction have had an obvious impact on al Qaeda's operational effectiveness. A new study from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, *Human Security 2007*, finds that since 2001, there has been a net decline of 40 percent in casualties from terrorism around the world. (That is excluding Iraq, which is after all a war zone; if you include it, there has been an overall increase since 2001 but a decrease since 2006.) Another 2007 analysis, by the U.S.-based IntelCenter, "came to the conclusion," according to Zakaria, "that the number of Islamist attacks had declined 65 percent from a high point in 2004, and fatalities from such attacks had declined by 90 percent."

With only a handful of exceptions—the bombings in Bali (2002), Madrid (2004), and London (2005) come to mind—the attacks staged by al Qaeda and its affiliates have mostly killed fellow Muslims. This has led to a major backlash in the Muslim world. The survey data are summarized by the Simon Fraser report:

Muslim support for terrorist violence against civilians [as of July 2007] had declined by half or more over five years in all of the four countries polled: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

By late 2007 in Afghanistan, just 1 percent of Afghans "strongly supported" the presence of the Taliban and foreign jihadi fighters in their country. In Pakistan, support for Islamist political parties has collapsed—dropping by more than four-fifths between the 2002 and 2008 national elections. And in the North-West Frontier Province where al Qaeda has its strongest presence in Pakistan, support for Osama bin Laden dropped from 70 percent in

August 2007 to 4 percent in January 2008.

A December 2007 poll in Saudi Arabia found that Osama bin Laden's fellow countrymen had "dramatically turned against him, against al Qaeda, and against terrorism in general." And in Iraq, where the Islamists have suffered their greatest recent strategic setback, a major poll also released in December 2007 found that 100 percent of Iraqis—Sunnis as well as Shiites—found al Qaeda in Iraq's attacks on civilians to be "unacceptable."

Al Qaeda has not only lost support among the Muslim masses. It has lost support even among some of its strongest adherents. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, better known as "Dr. Fadl," was a co-founder of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al Qaeda. He was a mentor to Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the author of one of the most important jihadist tracts, *Guide to the Path of Righteousness for Jihad and Belief*. Last year, from an Egyptian prison cell, he issued a groundbreaking manifesto, *Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World*. While stipulating that some jihadist activity (e.g., in Afghanistan) is still justified, al-Sharif denounces the sort of indiscriminate bombings perpetrated by al Qaeda and particularly disagrees with attacks on Christians and Jews: "They are the neighbors of the Muslims . . . and being kind to one's neighbors is a religious duty." Zawahiri took this well-publicized challenge so seriously that he issued a response running to nearly 200 pages.

Other defectors from the jihadist ranks include the Saudi religious scholar Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, who according to Bergen and Cruikshank is "considered one of the fathers of the Sahwa, the fundamentalist awakening movement that swept through Saudi Arabia in the 80's," and whose sermons "helped turn bin Laden against the United States." Yet despite his impeccable pedigree, al-Oudah last year took to one of the most popular TV networks in the Middle East to denounce bin Laden in biting, personal terms:

My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilled? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed . . . in the name of al Qaeda? Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions on your back?

IF EVEN veteran jihadists are renouncing al Qaeda, is it time, then, to haul out the "Mission Accomplished" banner in the war on terrorism? There is an incentive for some conservatives and liberals to think so: the former because they want to proclaim President Bush's tough anti-ter-

rorist efforts to be a success, the latter because they want to claim that the terrorist threat has been overhyped and that we should leave Iraq and stop countenancing any restrictions on our civil liberties in the name of fighting terror. Even in the military, hardly a bastion of peaceniks, there is a tendency among many officers to suggest that, with the threat from terrorists and guerrillas on the wane, it is time to get back to old-fashioned soldiering focused on more conventional challenges.

For my part, while applauding the hard-won gains, I cannot help remembering that obituaries for al Qaeda have been written before and have proved premature. Who can forget the classic op-ed article in the *New York Times* under the headline, "The Declining Terrorist Threat"? The author, a former State Department official named Larry Johnson, wrote:

Judging from news reports and the portrayal of villains in our popular entertainment, Americans are bedeviled by fantasies about terrorism. They seem to believe that terrorism is the greatest threat to the United States and that it is becoming more widespread and lethal. They are likely to think that the United States is the most popular target of terrorists. And they almost certainly have the impression that extremist Islamic groups cause most terrorism. None of these beliefs [is] based in fact.

This spectacularly misbegotten passage was published on July 10, 2001—two months before 9/11. Today, thanks to a combination of counterterrorism successes and terrorist blundering, the threat has indeed declined. But it has hardly gone away, and there is always the possibility that our enemies will spring another nasty surprise from out of the blue.

The leading cause for continued concern is probably al Qaeda's success in constructing a sanctuary in Pakistan to replace the one it lost in Afghanistan after 9/11. Mike McConnell, director of National Intelligence, told Congress on February 27:

Despite our successes, the group has retained or regenerated key elements of its capability, including top leadership, operational mid-level lieutenants, and de-facto safe haven in Pakistan's border area with Afghanistan.

As part of this rebuilding process, a July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate concluded, al Qaeda has "regenerated key elements" of its capability to attack the American homeland.

Pakistan's government has repeatedly promised to send troops to clean out the al-Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries. And it has just as repeatedly renege on those pledges. General Dan McNeill, the

outgoing commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, told reporters on May 29 that we are seeing a "different approach" on Pakistan's part—an approach that seeks to appease the militants by striking non-aggression accords with them. Each time that has happened, attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan have spiked. The militants have become so emboldened since the last ceasefire in 2005 that they have established their own state-within-a-state and expanded their insurgency into the heart of Pakistan itself.

The most notable victim of this wave of Islamist terror was opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, murdered last December. Across the border in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Hamid Karzai was the target of a bold assassination attempt on April 27 of this year. Last year, losses in both Afghanistan and Pakistan reached their highest levels since the fall of the Taliban.

ALTHOUGH IN the foreseeable future there is scant likelihood of Islamic radicals taking over all of Afghanistan or Pakistan, the latter's nuclear program makes the insurgency especially worrisome. Considering that a number of extremists have infiltrated Pakistan's most sensitive facilities in the past, it is not inconceivable that militants could get their hands on a bomb. And Baitullah Mehsud, leader of the Pakistani Taliban, has vowed to carry his campaign of terror outside of the region. He told *al Jazeera* on January 25: "We want to eradicate Britain and America, and to shatter the arrogance and tyranny of the infidels. We pray that Allah will enable us to destroy the White House, New York, and London."

Nor, although Pakistan is now the most notable sanctuary for al Qaeda, is it the only one. The State Department's most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism*, released on April 30, lists many other areas around the globe where the group continues to operate:

A small number of al-Qaeda (AQ) operatives remain in East Africa, particularly Somalia, where they pose a serious threat to U.S. and allied interests in the region. . . . AQ-inspired terrorist elements, elements of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Lord's Resistance Army, remained in Sudan. . . . Remote areas of the Sahel and Maghreb regions in Africa serve as terrorist safe havens. The threat to U.S. interests from Islamic extremists increased in 2007 as a result of AQ merging with two Islamic extremist organizations that operate in the region: al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,

based in Algeria, and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. . . . Southeast Asia includes a safe-haven area composed of the Sulawesi Sea and Sulu Archipelago, which sit astride the maritime boundary between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. . . . The southern Philippines, specifically the Sulu archipelago and Mindanao, serve as terrorist safe havens. . . . Although no corroborated information shows that Hizballah, Hamas, or other Islamic extremist groups used the TBA [Tri-Border Area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay] for military-type training or planning of terrorist operations, the United States remains concerned that these groups use the TBA as a safe haven to raise funds.

In all of these locales, the U.S. and allied police, intelligence, and military services have made gains in recent years. But, as the State Department notes, the battle is hardly won.

The same might be said of Western Europe. Recall that the core 9/11 hijackers came from Hamburg. Since the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, and especially since the Madrid and London bombings, European security agencies have made considerable progress in stamping out militant cells. But there, too, the threat remains. Jonathan Evans, head of the British intelligence service MI5, stated last fall that some 2,000 individuals in the United Kingdom posed a threat because of their support for terrorism—a figure that had risen by 400 since 2006. Since most of these British Islamists are either Pakistani immigrants or descendants of immigrants, they have ready access to training and guidance from the al-Qaeda safe havens in Pakistan.

Evans added that the terror threat in the UK had not yet “reached its peak.” That should be of particular concern to Washington because citizens of the UK, along with those from other European Union nations, enjoy visa-free travel to the U.S. Indeed, al Qaeda has made considerable efforts to recruit European Muslims for precisely that reason. So far, none has managed to carry out a major attack against Americans, but this has had much to do both with good luck and with aggressive police and intelligence work. Our growing sense of progress in the battle against terrorism would have vanished overnight if a group of two dozen British-based Muslims had succeeded in their plot, uncovered in 2006, to use liquid explosives to blow as many as ten trans-Atlantic passenger planes out of the air.

Europe will remain at long-term risk from terrorism because of its failure to integrate the offspring of Muslim immigrants, thus creating embittered minorities ripe for radicalization. The U.S.

has done a great deal better in this regard. Still, as a New York Police Department report observed last year, even if Muslims in the U.S. are “more resistant” to the radical jihadist message, they are “not immune.” Indeed, the NYPD and other law-enforcement agencies have busted a number of homegrown terrorist plots since 9/11 that, if left undetected, could have been as deadly as the London or Madrid bombings.

The NYPD report noted that many of the conspirators involved in these plots have been inspired not by personal contact with al-Qaeda leaders, as was the case with the 9/11 plotters, but by radical websites. As detailed in a March report by Daniel Kimmage, an analyst for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, radical Islamists have developed a sophisticated system for disseminating propaganda via the Internet. Three “virtual media production and distribution entities”—Fajr, the Global Islamic Media Front, and Sahab—post materials on behalf of a variety of militant Islamist groups, including slick videos showcasing terrorist attacks set to inspirational music and exhortations to the faithful from Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. If the authorities manage to shut down one website, another quickly takes its place.

Terrorists who find their inspiration online and never visit an actual training camp are unlikely to achieve a very high degree of proficiency. But even relatively unsophisticated radicals can cause considerable destruction, as seen by the 191 people killed in Madrid and 52 killed in London. The Madrid bombing, in particular, played a pivotal role in changing the outcome of Spain’s election and driving its troops out of Iraq.

EVEN MORE potent attacks are possible in the future from terrorist groups that enjoy state sponsorship. The two most worrisome countries are Syria and Iran, the latter of which has the dubious honor of being designated by the State Department as the No. 1 state sponsor of terrorism. According to this year’s *Country Reports*, “Iran provides aid to Palestinian terrorist groups, Lebanese Hizballah, Iraq-based militants, and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.” Note that the recipients of this largess include not only Shiite outfits like Hizballah and the Mahdi army but also Sunni groups like Hamas and the Taliban. There is even evidence of cooperation between Iran and al Qaeda, notwithstanding the common wisdom in the West that Shiite and Sunni extremists cannot possibly work together.

In his book, *Against All Enemies* (2004), former NSC staffer Richard Clarke wrote that “al Qaeda regularly used Iranian territory for transit and sanc-

tuary prior to September 11" and that "al Qaeda's Egyptian branch, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, operated openly in Tehran." "It is no coincidence," Clarke continued, "that many of the al-Qaeda management team . . . moved across the border into Iran after U.S. forces finally invaded Afghanistan."

That relationship continues to this day. According to the most recent State Department report,

Iran [has] remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qaeda (AQ) members it has detained, and has refused to publicly identify those senior members in its custody. Iran has repeatedly resisted numerous calls to transfer custody of its AQ detainees to their countries of origin or third countries for interrogation or trial. Iran [has] also continued to fail to control the activities of some AQ members who fled to Iran following the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

By "fail to control," the State Department apparently means that Iran has allowed some al-Qaeda members on its soil to continue plotting terrorist attacks in countries like Saudi Arabia.

The terror connection is especially menacing because of Iran's nuclear program. The International Atomic Energy Agency has found improvements of late in Iran's ability to enrich uranium. If the mullahs acquire the bomb, the odds of terrorists getting their hands on the ultimate weapon will rise markedly—and will rise again if other states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with their own substantial numbers of radicals, make good on their *sotto voce* threats to acquire nukes to counter Iran's.

Closely aligned with Iran is Syria. The ruling clique in Damascus, composed primarily of Alawites (a Shiite sect) who profess a Baathist ideology, has been Iran's most reliable agent in supporting Hizballah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist proxies in the region. "Hamastan" (Gaza) and "Hizballahland" (southern Lebanon) rival Syria, Iran, and Pakistan's tribal areas as terrorist hangouts. Hizballah has managed to strengthen its hand since fighting Israel to a draw in the summer of 2006. Efforts by the elected government of Lebanon to bring this group and its Syrian sponsors to heel were met by a series of deadly car bombings whose victims included former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This May, the slow-motion Hizballah putsch culminated in the armed takeover of much of Beirut, ending in an ignominious accord that has given Hizballah veto power over the government's future actions.

Both Hizballah and Hamas are receiving a steady supply of ever-deadlier munitions from Iran

and Syria. Hamas regularly shoots its rockets at southern Israel, while Hizballah is stockpiling its own rockets for another day—to be used, perhaps, in retaliation for an American or Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear program.

These groups are a threat not just to two of our allies, Israel and Lebanon, but also to the United States itself. Hizballah, in particular, is responsible for a long line of atrocities against us, including the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. More recently, working with its sponsors in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hizballah has been complicit in attacks inside Iraq that have killed hundreds of American soldiers. Coalition forces even captured a Lebanese Hizballah operative in Iraq last year.

It is not hard to imagine that at some point in the future, if given the go-ahead from Tehran, Hizballah could expand its area of operations even farther afield. It has already committed mass murder in South America, specifically in Buenos Aires, where it blew up the Israeli embassy in 1992 and a Jewish community center in 1994. Hizballah is also believed to have cells in Europe, East Asia, and North America. With reason, senior U.S. officials have called Hizballah the "A-Team of Terrorists"; the threat it presents looms large, especially if Iran should precipitate an armed confrontation with the United States.

AL QAEDA, Hizballah, Hamas, and other Islamist groups, whether Sunni or Shiite, all operate in a broader context of Muslim public opinion. As I have mentioned, al Qaeda, which has been killing primarily fellow Muslims, has seen its standing plummet since 9/11. But indications are that Hizballah and Hamas, which have been "resisting" the "Zionist entity," remain more popular. And even al Qaeda's fall in popularity is a relative thing.

The best case for Muslim moderation comes in *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, by John Esposito, founding director of Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, and Dalia Mogahed, executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. Having conducted a six-year survey of tens of thousands of Muslims in more than 35 countries, the authors conclude that "only" 7 percent—i.e., those who say that the 9/11 attacks were "completely" justified—are "politically radicalized."

It is comforting to think that 93 percent of Muslims are "moderates," as Esposito and Mogahed claim. But even if this is true, it still gives us 91 mil-

lion radicals out of 1.3 billion Muslims world-wide. Actually, according to Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the figure is much higher. Satloff points out that if one adds the number of Muslims who think that 9/11 was “largely” or “partly” justified, the proportion jumps to 13.5 percent, a gain of 78 million radicals. Adding those who say that the attacks were “in some way” justified would yield another 300 million Muslims, for a total of 36.6 percent.

Which figure gives a better picture of Muslim extremism—7 percent, or 36.6 percent? Either way, the numbers are alarming. Even if you accept the low figure and then calculate that only 1 percent of these would be willing to take up arms, that still leaves more than 900,000 potentially violent radicals. In Iraq, al Qaeda has managed to cause untold carnage with fewer than 10,000 fighters. Imagine what 900,000 jihadists—or even a much smaller number—could do around the globe.

While it takes a significant population and a considerable industrial and technological base to wage modern conventional warfare, the resources needed for terrorism are paltry. The most destructive terrorist attack in history was pulled off by nineteen men with a budget estimated at less than \$500,000. It may be true that al Qaeda is losing followers, but even a small core could still carry out unimaginable atrocities, especially if they managed to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Sooner or later, if the terrorists keep trying, they are likely to succeed. As the saying goes, we have to be lucky every time; they have to be lucky once.

TO ALL this one might object that no matter how “lucky” al Qaeda gets, its ultimate objective—establishing a fundamentalist caliphate to rule over the historic lands of Islam, stretching from the Philippines to southern Spain—will remain a mad dream. True: so far, al Qaeda has not toppled a single regime. But many people could still be killed in the quest for this unrealizable goal, just as so many were killed by committed Communists in their quest to bring about a global proletarian revolution. The odds are that the tide of jihadist sentiment, which reached flood level in 2001, will take decades to recede.

And even if the defeat of the jihadists happens faster and sooner, we will still have much to fear from terrorism per se. Al Qaeda is not the first group to use this deadly tactic, and it will not be the last. While Islamists have rightly monopolized much of our attention in recent decades, other terrorist groups have been pioneering some disturb-

ing tactics. Suicide bombers were first used on a large scale not by al Qaeda but by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Chemical warfare was employed by the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo, which released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1994. Biological warfare was practiced in Oregon in 1984 by followers of the New Age guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who poisoned 750 people by infecting the salad bars at ten restaurants with salmonella.

It may seem bizarre to cite obscure religious cults as a serious potential threat to our security, but few people took al Qaeda seriously when it proclaimed war on us in 1996. Thanks to technology and globalization, as a National Intelligence Estimate warned last year, “even small numbers” of like-minded people will continue to be able to find each other and “mobilize resources to attack—all without requiring a centralized terrorist organization, training camp, or leader.”

The U.S. is and will remain especially vulnerable to such violence because, as the world’s most powerful nation, we will continue to be an inviting target for all sorts of zealots interested in publicizing their grievances. So whatever happens with al Qaeda, we can expect that terrorism, including potentially catastrophic terrorism, will be with us for a long time to come.

Be that as it may, however, it is far too early to write off al Qaeda as our main enemy. In fact, the threat from it actually grows as we become more complacent. It is all too easy to imagine that under a Democratic administration and a Democratic-controlled House and Senate, it will become harder and harder to resist the voices insisting that we pull out of Iraq, repeal the Patriot Act, roll back the executive branch’s surveillance authority, force the release of Guantanamo detainees or remand them to the normal criminal-justice system, impose even greater restrictions on interrogations of terrorist suspects, and generally dissipate the sense of urgency that has animated American counterterrorism efforts since 9/11. Under those circumstances, al Qaeda could stage a dismaying resurrection from the grave to which so many analysts have been rushing to consign it.

CIA Director Hayden’s warning, buried deep in the *Washington Post* story highlighting his more optimistic comments, is worth heeding:

We remain worried, and frankly, I wonder why some other people aren’t worried, too. . . . The fact that we have kept [Americans] safe for pushing seven years now has got them back into the state of mind where “safe” is normal. Our view is: safe is hard-won, every 24 hours.