# THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST TERRORISM: SUCCESSES AND FAILURES

More than seven years after the attacks of 11 September 2001, terrorism remains a fundamental threat to international security. While the core structure of al-Qaida has been significantly weakened, the jihadist ideology it espouses has nonetheless spread around the globe. As a result, counterterrorism efforts need to combine a number of strategies that differentiate between global, regional, and homegrown terrorist threats.



Terror attacks in London, 7 July 2005                                   REUTERS / Stringer UK

In the years since al-Qaida's 2001 attack on the US, terrorism has emerged as a pre-eminent global security concern. It is a multifaceted challenge that threatens not only the US and its friends and allies, but various other countries and communities around the globe. As a result, counterterrorism has acquired unprecedented importance in the making of security policy.

The threat is complex. At the global level, transnational networks like al-Qaida continue to organize mass-casualty attacks against Westerners. At the regional level, a variety of sub-state groups employ indiscriminate violence to address political grievances and pursue local agendas. Within Western states themselves, small groups of radicalized citizens – homegrown terrorists – plan violence against fellow nationals. While these threats are related, effective counterterrorism requires a partial compartmentalization of the terrorism phenomenon into global, regional, and homegrown variants. By subdividing terrorism, we gain an appreciation for the strategies that best tackle specific threats. At its core, countering terrorism requires two things: diminishing a group's capability to organize acts of violence and undermining a group's motivation to employ terrorism altogether. While the former demands the use of coercive force, the latter rests on the development of persuasive, diplomatic, and defensive strategies.
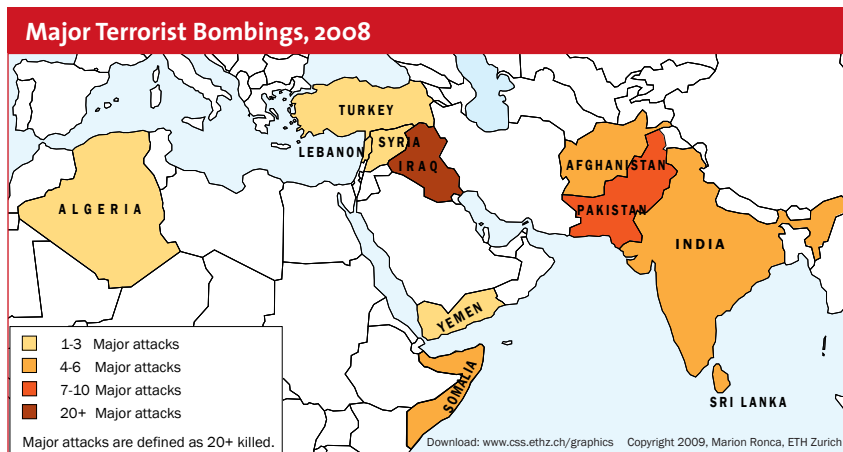
By conceiving of terrorism as a phenomenon with global, regional, and homegrown aspects and breaking counterterrorism into its two principal processes, decision-makers retain the ability to decide which strategy – counter-capability or counter-motivation – should be given priority. While long-term success in combating terrorism at all three levels will require a combination of both strategies, emerging trends from the conflict with al-Qaida offer lessons that help focus strategic priorities. First, while coercive measures have severely limited al-Qaida's operational capacity, the network has proven to be a robust and resilient ideological movement that directly and indirectly sponsors and motivates acts of terrorism around the world. Second, regional terrorist groups have tapped into al-Qaida's message in order to gain financial, ideological, and structural support and to construct partnerships with other groups. Third, the semi-autonomous radicalization of Western individuals stems from the perceived legitimacy that al-Qaida's austere socio-religious ideology of violent struggle against modernism – henceforth *al-Qaidaism* – continues to have in various milieus. For the counterterrorism community, understanding how and why these trends have developed helps to determine the strategies that are needed to deal effectively with emerging threats.

## Reducing Global Threats: The Limits of Coercion

The 9/11 attacks signaled the unprecedented coercive capacity of non-state actors. Al-Qaida demonstrated that sub-state organizations could organize acts of violence on the scale once reserved to states alone. That a handful of barely armed individuals could kill nearly 3,000 people, destroy billions of US dollars' worth of civilian and state infrastructure, and do so against a military and political superpower, was a clear indication that traditional conceptions of power and security had to be reconsidered. In reaction, the US, with the assistance of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and other global and regional organizations, formed a comprehensive counterterrorism coalition.

The coalition's immediate objective was to diminish al-Qaida's coercive capability. The UN-sanctioned elimination of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan – whose protection al-Qaida required and received in the years prior

## Major Terrorist Bombings, 2008



| | |
|---|---|
| ☐ | 1-3  Major attacks |
| ☐ | 4-6  Major attacks |
| ☐ | 7-10  Major attacks |
| ☐ | 20+  Major attacks |

Major attacks are defined as 20+ killed.

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to 2001 – was carried out by an expansive US-led operation. Military successes were many: the Taliban crumbled; high-ranking al-Qaida and Taliban leaders were eliminated; and al-Qaida's base of operation, training facilities, and institutional sanctuary were destroyed. Other structural victories included the systematic dismantling of al-Qaida's financial and recruitment networks. These successes destroyed much of al-Qaida's command and control mechanisms and forced it to abandon the protection of its former safe haven. The cumulative result was a diminishment of al-Qaida's ability to organize acts of terrorism in Europe and North America.

Despite these setbacks, however, al-Qaida today remains a significant threat to international peace and security. The reason stems from al-Qaida's reorganization into a potent ideological movement that colludes with and motivates others to carry out acts of terrorism. Al-Qaida's success in doing so is as much a result of its ideological resiliency as it is a general failure of US and global counterterrorism approaches. That the US shifted its military focus from destroying al-Qaida to toppling Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq added credence to al-Qaida's postulate of a global conflict between the West and the Arab and Muslim world. This confirmation of existing notions resuscitated al-Qaida. Furthermore, the coalition's continued focus on counter-capability operations as opposed to counter-motivation strategies did little to impede al-Qaida's broadening global appeal. The result was a security setback. While a flatter, leaner al-Qaida is a less dangerous organization, its ideological diffusion inspires violence worldwide.

### Regional Challenges: Delegitimizing al-Qaidaism

Regional terrorist groups have utilized indiscriminate violence in pursuit of local objectives long before 9/11. Nationalist groups like the Tamil Tigers, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and Babbar Khalsa; Marxist extremists like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the Shining Path; and a bevy of other right-wing and irredentist groups have threatened violence for decades. However, it is the increasing ideological affinity between al-Qaida and regional Islamist groups like Gema'ah Islamiyah, al-Shabab, the Special Purpose Islamic Regiment, and various others that is the most alarming post-9/11 trend. With the invasion of Iraq, al-Qaida's authority was strengthened. The war was perceived by Muslims as a clear affront against them. The statements to this effect that al-Qaida had been issuing since the 1990s now seemed prescient. Within months, unaffiliated groups began hoisting al-Qaida's banner. Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat officially became al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb in 2006. Al-Qaida in Iraq followed a similar trajectory, as have franchises in Pakistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, and Saudi Arabia. The significance of al-Qaida's ability to attract global aspirants should not be underestimated. It represents al-Qaida's best option for survival, continued relevancy, and eventual renewal. As a unifying umbrella movement, al-Qaidaism also fosters cross-regional cooperation, allowing tactical successes from one battlefield to be more easily transferred and applied to another.

For the international coalition, the ease with which al-Qaida has undergone metamorphosis is a reversal for counterterrorism. It stems, in part, from a failure to contend properly with al-Qaida's transformation since 2001 from a transnational paramilitary group into an ideological movement. It also signals a failure to move on to the second phase of the conflict against al-Qaida – delegitimization. Just as eliminating al-Qaida's operational capability was an initial priority, today's objective must focus on delegitimiz-

ing al-Qaidaism and stigmatizing terrorism more generally. That al-Qaida was successful in its devolution and has since found wide appeal at the regional level suggests that a political rather than coercive conflict must now be waged. Decoupling al-Qaida's global ambition from the local aspirations of regional Islamists and rolling back indigenous support for al-Qaidaism is now a strategic imperative. Part of that process will involve addressing, where feasible, the socio-political grievances that cultivate support for terrorism. Though a complicated endeavor, ameliorating the environmental conditions that terrorists exploit will help diminish regional threats, whether they are al-Qaida-driven or stem from nationalist, irredentist, Marxist, or other supremacist ambitions.

### Combating Homegrown Terrorism

Terrorism originating from within Western states has paralleled regional trends. A variety of homegrown groups, like the IRA, November 17, ETA, and the Red Army Faction, have carried out terrorist attacks in Europe over the past 40 years. Today's homegrown threat, however, is a distinct and much more demanding security challenge. It stems from the growing appeal of al-Qaida's ideology in certain pockets of Western society. The phenomenon began in earnest with the 2004 Madrid bombings. Since then, dozens of attacks and foiled attempts have been visited upon a variety of other cities, from London to Toronto. For the most part, perpetrators have been citizens born, raised, and educated within the countries they attack, while targets have been fellow nationals. Though a few individuals have been externally supported by al-Qaida, a vast majority of homegrown terrorist groups are autonomous, self-generated, and independently organized. The attacks they coordinate are not usually sophisticated, though some, notably the Madrid and London bombings, have killed and injured hundreds.

The increasing prevalence of unaffiliated homegrown terrorism is related to al-Qaida's structural and ideological evolution. Most, if not all, attacks have been "inspired" by al-Qaida. Globalization and the internet revolution created the preconditions allowing al-Qaidaism to penetrate Western society. With a little encouragement, individuals who are predisposed to accept al-Qaida's vision of international relations create small networks autonomously. They carry out their attacks against the countries within which they live, in retaliation for what they perceive as unjust policies in the Muslim and Arab world. Fellow nation-

| Number of Terrorism-related Arrests, by Country and Affiliation, Europe 07 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Member States | Islamist | Separatist | Left Wing | Right Wing | Total by Country |
| Austria | 5 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 8 |
| Belgium | 9 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Bulgaria | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Cyprus | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Denmark | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| France | 91 | 315 | 3 | 0 | 409 |
| Germany | 3 | 8 | 4 | 0 | 15 |
| Ireland | 0 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 24 |
| Italy | 21 | 0 | 23 | 0 | 44 |
| Portugal | 1 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 32 |
| Romania | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Slovakia | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Spain | 48 | 196 | 17 | 0 | 261 |
| Sweden | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Netherlands | 4 | 1 | 1 | 10 | 16 |
| UK | - | - | - | - | 203 |
| **Total by Affiliation** | **201** | **548** | **48** | **44** | **1044** |

*Source: The EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Europol 2008*

als are considered legitimate targets because of their assumed support for these policies.

In the long term, countering homegrown terrorism will depend on successes at the regional level. Delegitimizing al-Qaidaism, decoupling local grievances from al-Qaida's global ambitions, and working to find palatable solutions to regional flashpoints should help tackle some of the factors behind the radicalization of Westerners. Until then, combating the homegrown threat will rest on internal, police- and intelligence-driven mechanisms rather than a reliance on military measures. Defending against acts of violence and constructing mitigating capabilities that can diffuse the impact of terrorism should lesson the effectiveness of homegrown threats. Finally, discouraging Westerners from accepting al-Qaidaism will require a concentrated effort to counteract the socio-political polarization of national sub-groups and guarding against the related threats of xenophobia, racism, and political prejudice.

## Taking Stock of Solutions
The complexity of modern terrorism significantly complicates the development and implementation of practical solutions. What is clear is that some combination of counter-capability and counter-motivation will have to be utilized. While coercive measures weaken terrorist groups, tackling threats over the long term will require weaving together diplomatic, defensive, and developmental strategies. The decision over which combination of coercive and non-coercive measures should be applied will depend on the specific threat being addressed.

At the global level, counterterrorism will continue to focus on military operations, though non-coercive measures must also be applied. Targeting, killing, and when possible, capturing al-Qaida leaders and facilitators will keep the organization disorganized. Pinpoint attacks in Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan – though normatively and legally contentious – will degrade al-Qaida's ability to reconstitute its pre-9/11 organization. The emphasis should be on the containment of al-Qaida's central figures, namely Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahri, whose ability to remain at large not only embarrasses the international coalition, but strengthens the resolve and morale of al-Qaida's supporters. Coercion will also be useful in limiting al-Qaida's arms smuggling, recruitment, and training and in constructing deterrent strategies that target state sponsorship of terrorism, especially concerning WMD threats. Among non-coercive measures, tracking the financing of terrorism and strengthening intelligence-sharing institutions are a priority. Both will require international multilateralism. Finally, al-Qaida must be delegitimized. The goal should be to foster a cross-national normative, ideological, and religious rejection of al-Qaida's use and justification of terrorism.

At the regional level, success will depend on efforts that go beyond counterterrorism. Al-Qaida's popularity with diverse regional and local communities must be addressed. This will be a difficult endeavor, akin to combating Communism rather than the Soviet Union. The solution rests on decoupling al-Qaida from local groups and ameliorating certain socio-political conditions. Doing so

will weaken the global threat of terrorism by diminishing the operational reach of al-Qaida while allowing local actors to deal more effectively with local terrorist groups. All of this will require a multifaceted approach that emphasizes diplomatic and developmental leverages over military ones. This will include the use of de-radicalization programs that seek to cultivate, promote, and build the capacity of moderate voices that drives al-Qaidaism to the outer edges of acceptable social and religious behavior. Finally, Western policies that galvanize communities susceptible to al-Qaidaism should be addressed. The reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan as secure and sovereign states, the stabilization of Somalia, Sudan, and Lebanon, the diffusion of conflict within the broader Middle East and the Palestinian-Israeli context more specifically, and attending to the fallout from Guantanamo detentions might help diminish the popularity of al-Qaida's message. To be sure, these are lofty goals. However, inaction in the face of the factors that motivate regional and global terrorism only strengthens al-Qaida.

Finally, countering homegrown terrorism will rest on managing threats. Non-military security strategies that involve domestic intelligence-gathering, solid police work, and proper judicial handling will help eliminate immediate threats. Other management strategies include the construction of defensive capabilities that diminish the practicality of carrying out violent acts. Similarly, increasing social and institutional preparedness will help mitigate the long-term socio-economic consequences of terrorist attacks. By diminishing the perceived benefits of using terrorism, both strategies help deter its use. Finally, honing capabilities to track and capture homegrown terrorists and then successfully dealing with them on legal and punitive grounds will help diminish threats in an efficient and just fashion. In sum, tackling homegrown threats will require finding a proper balance between the denial of terrorism, the promotion of domestic security, and the protection of democratic civil liberties.

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