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Beyond Bullets:
*A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat
Violent Islamist Extremism*

By Kristin M. Lord, John A. Nagl, Seth D. Rosen



Center for a
New American
Security

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Cover Image

A U.S. Marine provides first aid care for an Afghan man during a patrol through the Helmand province in southern Afghanistan in August 2008.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Department of Defense; Cpl. Alex C. Guerra, U.S. Marine Corps.

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About the Solarium Strategy Series

The CNAS Solarium Strategy Series draws its name and inspiration from an effort undertaken by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953. The original Project Solarium was a competitive strategy development process that is credited with helping articulate several pillars of American Cold War strategy. Through a similarly structured process of inclusive debate and extensive analysis, CNAS has developed several strategy documents that are designed to serve as useful inputs to the broader national debate over U.S. national security in the post-September 11 era. They are available online at www.cnas.org.

BEYOND BULLETS: A PRAGMATIC STRATEGY TO COMBAT VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

By Kristin M. Lord, John A. Nagl, Seth D. Rosen

Introduction

Violent Islamist extremism will remain a potent threat to American national security for the foreseeable future. Nearly eight years after the September 11 attacks, al Qaeda retains the capability to launch devastating attacks around the globe, and President Obama has warned publicly that the organization is planning attacks on American soil.¹ Catastrophic terrorism—employing chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons—is a remote but grave risk. Beyond U.S. borders, American interests, including American allies, institutions, and citizens, remain likely targets. From Pakistan to Somalia, a complex assortment of Islamist extremists threatens to destabilize whole countries or regions, potentially unleashing political turmoil, economic distress, and widespread violence. These threats are likely to persist, challenging the United States and its allies throughout the Obama administration and beyond.

To protect vital American interests, our country needs a pragmatic and comprehensive strategy that works to eliminate al Qaeda as a functioning organization and undermines violent Islamist extremism in its many forms. As other national security concerns proliferate, America must re-commit to countering violent extremism by employing an approach that is sustainable, properly resourced, grounded in bipartisan political support, and bolstered by a dense network of partnerships that engages actors both inside and outside of government. This strategy must provide broad strategic direction as well as a coherent roadmap to guide government-wide planning, day-to-day decision making, and budgeting. American policy and its implementation are already moving in the right direction, a process that started in the later years of the Bush administration and now has a new chance for success in the Obama administration.

An effective strategy will engage all appropriate instruments of national power in a cohesive vision for action: military and moral, diplomatic and economic, intelligence and informational. It must thwart the conditions that nurture violent Islamist extremism and work to prevent the recruitment of the next generation of extremists. It must discredit the movement's methods and undermine its credibility, while strengthening the ability of those best positioned to challenge these organizations and ideologies. And it must recognize the variety of motivations and interests that distinguish violent extremist groups, as well as the ideological and organizational threads that pull them together.

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America’s government and armed forces cannot and should not be at the center of every effort to combat violent extremism. They cannot be all places at all times and, in many instances, less direct measures are more effective. To kill and capture terrorists, foreign intelligence services, militaries, and police forces must often lead. To foster environments hostile to violent extremism, civilians and civilian organizations must assume greater responsibility and strengthen their capacity. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the communities in which violent extremists thrive, the U.S. must draw more effectively on experts outside of the government. In short, the United

States must find a new way to combat violent extremism that more effectively engages foreign partners and actors outside of government. Some control will be lost. But that loss will be repaid, many times over, by increased effectiveness. The United States must adapt its role to circumstance, being sometimes a leader, sometimes a quiet supporter, sometimes the coordinator of diverse actors, and sometimes the determined projector of force. America needs all of these capacities to effectively confront violent extremism. In developing them, the U.S. government will create the expertise and networks necessary to protect America against a range of transnational challenges, from nuclear proliferation to transnational crime, pandemic influenza to cyber security.

Despite the all-too-real menace posed by violent Islamist extremism, America must respond without overstating the threat, overspending national resources, reacting in ways that are ultimately counterproductive, or compromising core values. Violent extremism will not be the only threat to American security in the coming years. A reaction that compromises America’s moral authority undercuts its power. And, perversely, the threat will become all the more potent if it is exaggerated.

The more time that passes without an attack on American soil, the more this threat will test the commitment of American leaders and the nation’s collective patience. The struggle with violent Islamist extremism is likely to be long, with neither a formal declaration of victory from U.S. leaders nor an acknowledgment of defeat by adversaries. Thus, this strategy calls on America’s leaders and the American public to put the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in proper perspective and to sustain the will necessary to confront this threat. At a time of abundant challenges — economic, environmental, and security — this will be politically difficult. But to suppress violent extremism, America must gather the political will to take the

threat seriously, mobilize a coherent and unified response, and sustain the public support necessary to win a long and wearying struggle.

This paper seeks to support this effort by presenting:

- A chronology of America’s evolving response to violent Islamist extremism
- A clear analysis of the threat
- Strategic principles to guide U.S. actions
- A realistic vision of success
- A comprehensive plan — involving intelligence, diplomacy, military operations, strategic public engagement, law enforcement, finance and development, and homeland defense — to achieve U.S. objectives.

The strategy presented here draws from a competitive policy analysis led by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). Modeled after President Eisenhower’s Project Solarium, CNAS asked five experts to examine the threat posed by violent Islamist extremism, to recommend U.S. policies to counter extremism, and then to debate them. This paper distills these insights, and our own views, into a comprehensive strategy to suppress violent Islamist extremism and combat the threat it poses to American interests.²

America’s Response to Violent Islamist Extremism

America’s struggle against violent Islamist extremists began well before September 11, 2001. The February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center marked the beginning of a wave of Islamist attacks against American targets, but the threat failed to earn widespread public or political recognition until the 2001 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. These attacks shook the public conscience and led the Bush administration to make terrorism the defining centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy. A less well defined third phase began during the second Bush administration,

when policy makers adopted a less aggressive tone and emphasized the utility of non-military instruments of national power to combat violent extremism. Under President Obama, U.S. counterterrorism strategy has entered still a new chapter, one that continues some of the previous administration’s policies while breaking sharply from others.

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A NEGLECTED THREAT

Despite the efforts of a small group of individuals within the Clinton administration, concerns about the severe threat posed by violent Islamist extremism failed to resonate with politicians and the broader public even after the 1993 attack against the World Trade Center, 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa, and the 2000 attack against the USS Cole in Yemen. In this context, the administration treated terrorism largely as a law enforcement challenge, an approach reinforced by the threat of domestic terrorism, which earned new attention after the bombing of an Oklahoma City federal building by a U.S. citizen. America’s leading law enforcement agency, the FBI,

received an infusion of funding in the mid-to-late 1990s to expand its counterterrorism division, enhance its investigative tools, and strengthen its training programs.³

To counter the threat posed by foreign terrorists, the Clinton administration emphasized non-military responses.⁴ The Anti-Terrorism Act of 1996 criminalized financial support of designated terrorist organizations by Americans.⁵ After the 1998 bombings of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, a federal grand jury handed down a 238-count indictment against Osama bin Laden and five associates, and the State Department announced a \$5 million reward for information leading to bin Laden's capture.⁶ An executive order signed by President Clinton imposed economic sanctions on the Afghan Taliban for aiding bin Laden.⁷

The Clinton administration took direct military action against violent extremists sparingly. In retaliation for the 1998 embassy bombings, the United States fired cruise missiles at a bin Laden camp in Afghanistan and the al Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan. However, national security officials decided not to authorize strikes on several other occasions when the CIA received intelligence reports on bin Laden's location. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, this reluctance stemmed from the uncertainty of intelligence reports, fears of collateral damage, legal questions, the failure of the 1998 strikes, and the partisan climate in Washington.⁸ As Samuel Berger, Clinton's national security advisor, told the 9/11 Commission, such decisions were made "from the vantage point of the driver looking through a muddy windshield moving forward, not through a clean rearview mirror."⁹

THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, countering terrorism became a central organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy. President

George W. Bush rejected the approach of his predecessor, arguing, "Our goal is not to reduce terror to some acceptable level of nuisance. Our goal is to defeat terror by staying on the offensive, destroying terrorists, and spreading freedom and liberty around the world."¹⁰ In a speech to the nation, Bush explained the administration's more forceful approach: "We have learned that terrorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength. They are invited by the perception of weakness."¹¹

To counter the threat posed by al Qaeda, the Bush administration launched the "global war on terror." In October 2001, Bush ordered the invasion of Afghanistan to deprive al Qaeda of its sanctuary and training camps and weaken its command-and-control structure. President Bush later justified the 2003 invasion of Iraq partly because of perceived links between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, a claim later refuted.¹² Because of the emphasis placed on military operations to defeat al Qaeda, the Defense Department and intelligence communities played leading roles. According to the Congressional Research Service, as of July 2008, approximately 94 percent of "war on terror-related" funding had gone to the Defense Department, with only 6 percent spent on foreign assistance and State Department programming.¹³

The administration's focus on countering terrorism influenced policies both at home and abroad. Domestically, the United States invested heavily in homeland security, creating a new government agency devoted to that cause and imposing new restrictions on the movement of goods and people. The passage of the Patriot Act gave law enforcement agencies sweeping power to search communication records without a court order.¹⁴ Internationally, diplomatic priorities and foreign assistance were reconfigured to prioritize relationships that could help counter terrorism. President Bush launched an unprecedented campaign of covert action, detaining thousands of terrorism suspects across the globe and adopting the

practice of extraordinary renditions. A European Parliament report found that at least 1,200 CIA-operated flights had used European airspace for renditions from 2001 to 2005.¹⁵ In order to interrogate terrorism suspects for as long as necessary, the CIA created a secret network of “black site” facilities, some of which were in Eastern Europe.¹⁶ Administration officials approved the use of harsh interrogation methods—including the controversial practice known as waterboarding—from 2002 to 2005 to retrieve information from some detainees.¹⁷

Advancing democracy—a policy known as the “freedom agenda”—was viewed as a critical component in the fight against Islamist extremism. The violence of September 11, 2001, was seen as a manifestation of the political repression and stagnation that had consumed the Middle East in the preceding decades, creating a breeding ground for radicalism.¹⁸ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice echoed that refrain in an important speech in Cairo in June 2005: “For 60 years, the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East—and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.”¹⁹ Major new initiatives such as the Middle East Peace Initiative invested millions in democracy promotion.

BEYOND THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

America’s approach to counterterrorism shifted noticeably during the second Bush administration. Administration officials used less aggressive rhetoric and discussed dropping the phrase “global war on terror” in favor of “global struggle against violent extremism.” In a 2005 interview, Stephen J. Hadley, Bush’s national security adviser, said that the fight against al Qaeda was “more than just a military war on terror” and that the United States had to combat “the gloomy vision” of the extremists and “offer a positive alternative.”²⁰ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ensured

that diplomacy played a larger role in America’s national security arsenal. One of the president’s closest advisors, Karen Hughes, took over the effort to win “hearts and minds.” The CIA stopped using harsh interrogation techniques in 2006. That year the president acknowledged that the prison at Guantanamo Bay alienated some allies and provided fodder for extremists and said, “I’d like to close Guantanamo.”²¹ Robert Gates replaced Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary, producing a marked change in both style and substance at the Pentagon. Time and again, Gates emphasized the importance of civilian agencies playing a leading role in the struggle against al Qaeda. During a 2007 speech at Kansas State University, he said that, “We must focus our energies beyond the guns and steel of the military, beyond just our brave soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. We must also focus our energies on the other elements of national power that will be so crucial in the coming years.”²² In the final months of the administration, a new public diplomacy leader, journalist James Glassman, shifted the tone of the “war of ideas” further, observing that this struggle was occurring within the Muslim world and that the United States should step out of the spotlight.²³

A NEW ERA

The election of President Obama launched a new phase in the U.S. effort to combat violent extremism. Upon entering office, Obama took immediate steps to deprive extremists of anti-American sympathy and public support by issuing executive orders to close the Guantanamo Bay facility and ban the use of interrogation methods he considered torture.²⁴ He declared his firm intention to draw down troops in Iraq and named a distinguished envoy, former U.S. Senator George Mitchell, to seek progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. In his inaugural address, the president called for America to “seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect” with the world’s Muslim populations. He then granted his first formal interview to

an Arab television station, underscoring that “the United States has a stake in the wellbeing of the Muslim world.”²⁵ Additionally, the administration emphasized that concerns about al Qaeda would no longer dominate America’s relationship with Muslims worldwide.²⁶

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President Obama also moved rapidly to adopt a new strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the territorial heartland of violent Islamist extremism. That strategy aims to destroy al Qaeda’s safe haven in those countries and disrupt its ability to launch future attacks. Referring to al Qaeda’s relations with Islamist militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, General David H. Petraeus indicated that “There is a degree of hierarchy, there is a degree of interconnection, and there is certainly a flow of

people, money, expertise, explosives and knowledge.”²⁷ By building the capacity of Afghan and Pakistani institutions, the administration seeks to develop those countries’ ability to combat insurgents and terrorism with limited international support and, in the longer term, deliver the services and level of governance necessary to reduce popular support for the insurgency.²⁸

To date, President Obama’s nascent counterterrorism strategy shows some signs of continuity with his predecessor’s. Obama has authorized drone strikes not just on al Qaeda targets in north-west Pakistan, but against the training camps of Pakistani militant Baitullah Mehsud.²⁹ The Obama administration has also been grappling with how to handle the detainees in Guantanamo who cannot be sent to other countries or brought before a court because of the harsh interrogation techniques used on them. “What do we do with the 50 to 100 — probably in that ballpark — who we cannot release and cannot try?” Secretary Gates asked in an April hearing before the Senate Appropriations Committee.³⁰

The Obama administration’s early days offer a promising foundation on which to build an effective new strategy to counter violent Islamist extremism, one that continues those aspects of the Bush administration’s policies worth retaining and rejects sharply those that should not endure. Large numbers of policy makers and national security experts from both parties are likely to find much common ground regarding the contours of the principled and pragmatic new policy to combat violent extremism.

Evolving Adversaries

Though the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations is comprised of more than 40 groups, the most dangerous to the United States shroud themselves in the symbols of Islam. The majority of faithful Muslims rejects the violent means of Islamist radicals, decrying them

as heretical to a religion of peace. Yet the radicals' ability to appeal to religious devotion and a common sense of grievance among Muslims is undeniably a source of power, allowing extremists to attract resources, followers, and moral support.

Among Islamist militants, the most serious threat comes from the movement known as al Qaeda, a global network connected by a unifying ideology. The organization's narrative is not one of violence for the sake of violence. It commits terrorism to achieve particular political ends—the withdrawal of U.S. influence, and especially the U.S. military presence, in the Middle East; the overthrow of autocratic Sunni regimes; the eradication of Israel; and the reestablishment of a pan-Arab caliphate. This ideology is predicated on a particular interpretation of history, Islamic theology, and U.S. foreign policy, first outlined in Osama bin Laden's 1996 "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans." In this declaration, bin Laden presented set of grievances against the United States and its "agents," which he blames for the suppression and humiliation of the true Muslim faith and Muslims everywhere. The United States, he argued, has propped up autocratic rulers, invaded Muslim lands, supported Israel, repressed the Palestinians, and stationed forces in the holy land of Saudi Arabia.³¹

Al Qaeda has shaped global opinion and radicalized individuals in Muslim communities worldwide, including diaspora communities in the West. Since September 11, al Qaeda's leaders have inspired a steady stream of young men to join the ranks of the global jihad and provided them with training and support. The organization's leaders have employed both traditional and "new" media to promote their narrative and garner influence. "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media," Zawahiri wrote in a letter to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the former head of al Qaeda in Iraq. "...We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma."³²

The organization has a prodigious propaganda machine—*as-Sahab*—and has skillfully adapted the latest technology, including blogs, YouTube videos, and Web forums, to advance its agenda.³³ Al Qaeda's objective is to spur independent attacks on Western targets without its own direct involvement. Thanks to the Internet, new supporters can be steeped in the ideological beliefs and operational tactics of the movement before ever meeting an al Qaeda operative.

Al Qaeda has maintained a degree of public sympathy and support. According to a February 2009 poll conducted by the coalition of polling groups known as World Public Opinion.org, 21 percent of Egyptians and 16 percent of Pakistanis support al Qaeda's attacks on Americans and the organization's view of the United States.³⁴ Furthermore, 7 percent of British Muslims, including 13 percent of those 16–24 years old, "admire" the organization.³⁵ While al Qaeda does not enjoy wide public support in Europe or the United States, a devoted and highly mobilized core is more than sufficient to constitute a threat.

Al Qaeda has evolved into a dispersed and durable network. Whereas before September 11 the organization consisted mainly of a core group of graduates from the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet Union, the movement is now composed of four distinct elements: al Qaeda's central organization, affiliated groups, semi-autonomous actors, and *takfiri*³⁶ "self-starters."³⁷ In the words of Bruce Hoffman, al Qaeda now implements both "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches. Its leaders encourage "independent thought and action from low- (or lower-) level operatives... [while] issuing orders and still coordinating a far-flung terrorist enterprise."³⁸ It is important to remember that these four general categories only represent today's al Qaeda. As long as it survives, the movement will evolve and adapt to circumstances.

The al Qaeda Movement

Al Qaeda: Al Qaeda's central organization is composed of a core group of commanders, led by bin Laden and Zawahiri, who live in the rugged terrain of northwest Pakistan. From this base al Qaeda continues to train operatives, deploy recruits, disseminate propaganda and funding, and communicate with cells abroad.³⁹ Al Qaeda serves as the "inciter in chief" of a movement that links local groups and their missions to a global cause, cloaked in legitimate symbols of religious devotion.⁴⁰ It conveys support to a diverse range of actors that it co-opts to serve its own ends. Although numerous al Qaeda leaders have been captured or killed since 2001, the organization possesses a deep bench with operational experience and has had little difficulty generating new leaders.⁴¹ Al Qaeda still holds the aspiration, acumen, and capacity to commit devastating attacks on American targets in the United States and abroad.⁴²

Affiliated groups: Since September 11, al Qaeda's collaboration and affiliation with other Islamist extremist organizations has deepened. Al Qaeda often provides money, training, and weapons to these groups, as well as a wider platform to espouse their cause.⁴³ In return, al Qaeda has channeled these groups' local grievances into the larger narrative of global jihad.⁴⁴ Several local organizations have formally adopted the al Qaeda brand name. Prominent among these is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which transformed in 2007 into al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb. The al-Shabab organization in Somalia has not officially become an al Qaeda franchise, but its leaders regularly state that they share al Qaeda's beliefs, motivations, and objectives. Finally, al Qaeda has enhanced the operational abilities of and provided logistical support to Taliban-linked extremists in Pakistan.

Semi-autonomous actors: These operatives have links to the central organization, often receiving training or seed money. However, they recruit, plan, and execute attacks with little direct guidance from al Qaeda commanders.⁴⁵ A prominent example is the group that conducted the London bombings of July 7, 2005.⁴⁶ Semi-autonomous extremists and radicalized individuals in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia represent an acute danger to the United States, its allies, and interests. Jonathan Evans, the director general of the United Kingdom's Security Services, said at the end of 2007 that 2,000 British residents posed a threat because of involvement in Islamist terrorist activities—a jump of 400 from the previous year.⁴⁷ The possibility that second- or third-generation immigrants, holding European or American passports and thus the ability to circumvent strict screening processes and border controls, will launch terrorist attacks inside the United States is a major concern.

Takfiri "self-starters": The final component of the network of violent Islamist extremists is individuals radicalized by al Qaeda's extreme ideology without any direct connection to the organization. Because they are not tied into the larger movement, *takfiri* entrepreneurs are difficult for intelligence services to identify and thwart. One of the most notorious examples is Mohammed Bouyeri, the Dutch-Moroccan teenager who killed the iconic filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in 2004.

The threat posed by these four groups remains genuine and persistent despite the many plots foiled by U.S. and foreign officials.⁴⁸ Of greatest concern, al Qaeda has experimented with chemical and biological agents and demonstrated a long-standing desire to acquire nuclear weapons. Ever mindful of the propaganda value of terrorism, al Qaeda is unlikely to want to signal its own weakness by launching an attack smaller than those of September 11. However, this does not eliminate the possibility of smaller attacks by independent or semi-autonomous groups against targets in the United States or American interests overseas. For example, the September 2008 assault on the U.S. embassy in Yemen, which killed ten guards and civilians, but no Americans, could be a harbinger of future attacks.⁴⁹

Attacks against American allies are likely to continue. Al Qaeda and its affiliates have perpetrated deadly attacks on three continents since September 11, 2001, including attacks in Indonesia, Jordan, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. European nations face a particularly grave risk due to a small minority of radicalized Muslims within their populations. Some of these second- and third-generation Europeans have extensive connections and easy access to their ancestral homelands in North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia, enabling them to receive training and operational guidance from other violent extremists. Al Qaeda remains a significant threat to Iraq's fragile stability. While the organization's support and capabilities have been dramatically degraded, it can still be deeply disruptive, especially in and around Mosul. The planned withdrawal of most U.S. troops in upcoming years opens opportunities for the organization to regenerate and reignite sectarian tensions.

The combined efforts of al Qaeda and local insurgents also imperil the stability of weak states. This

endangers not just these nations but also America's larger strategic interests. After all, al Qaeda planned the September 11 attacks from the safe haven of a fragile state. Within the "ungoverned spaces" of weak states, local violent extremist groups can flourish. Yemen, for example, is emerging as a training ground and sanctuary for militants. Furthermore, these areas can serve as a magnet for foreign extremists, who then prey upon and conflate local grievances into the larger *takfiri* narrative. Imbued with the ideological fervor and operational expertise of foreign fighters, these local groups can magnify their ability to weaken their national governments and threaten U.S. interests abroad. This scenario is playing out in Somalia, where al Shabab's capabilities are being enhanced by hundreds of foreign fighters.⁵⁰

Afghanistan and Pakistan are countries of particular concern because they offer al Qaeda a safe haven from which to operate and are a base for homegrown Islamist militants with growing links to the al Qaeda movement.⁵¹ In both countries, extremists could foment enduring unrest and political instability. Their victories are likely to embolden Islamist militants elsewhere. Pakistan faces particularly grave security challenges. Persistent terrorist attacks—the country has suffered more than 60 suicide attacks in the last two years, plus military and political victories of Taliban groups in locales less than 100 miles from Islamabad—present an existential threat to Pakistan's government.⁵² The thought of a collapsed Pakistan raises the specter of nuclear terrorism—one of the gravest threats to American national security today. According to General Petraeus, "Pakistan has become the nerve center of al Qaeda's global operations, allowing the terror group to re-establish its organizational structure and build stronger ties to al Qaeda offshoots in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and parts of Europe."⁵³

MAINTAINING PERSPECTIVE

Though the threat from al Qaeda and its affiliates is concerning it is important not to overstate the organization's power or skill. The al Qaeda movement has committed numerous strategic errors, most prominently its actions in Iraq. Through the use of excessive violence, al Qaeda in Iraq alienated the Iraqi population, discredited the organization's message, and undermined its wider goals. As a result, the organization's attempts to foment a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites backfired. Al Qaeda in Iraq not only isolated itself from the surrounding population, but also pushed Sunni tribes into an unlikely alliance with U.S. forces.⁵⁴ These missteps caused dissension within the organization's own ranks. Abu Taha al-Lihebi, a former al Qaeda in Iraq leader in eastern Anbar, told *The Washington Post* last year that he left the organization because it indiscriminately targeted civilians instead of the occupying power.⁵⁵

The killing of Muslim civilians has cost the wider al Qaeda movement support elsewhere as well. The Abu Musab al-Zarqawi network's November 2005 bombings of three hotels in Amman, Jordan, which killed 60 people, produced a backlash against al Qaeda. Thousands of Jordanians took to the streets to denounce native son al-Zarqawi and al Qaeda's ideology.⁵⁶ A poll conducted by Jordan University's Center for Strategic Studies a month after the bombings showed that only 20 percent of the population viewed al Qaeda as a "legitimate resistance group" — down from 67 percent in 2004.⁵⁷ In Pakistan, the Taliban's vicious tactics are generating growing public anger, according to media reports.⁵⁸

The Way Forward

The time has come for the new administration to adopt and implement a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that works to eliminate al Qaeda as a functioning organization and undermines violent Islamist extremism in its many forms. A new strategy must ensure that the U.S. government

devotes the proper resources, staff, attention, and political capital to a struggle that is likely to last a generation or more and builds the necessary diplomatic relationships and public-private partnerships to support those efforts. This paper lays out a whole-of-government strategy to counter violent Islamist extremism and recommends specific steps below.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Seven principles guide this strategy:

1 *Since violent extremists are decentralized, dispersed, and able to appeal to local populations, an effective strategy must craft a decentralized, credible, and local response.*

Wherever feasible, the United States should step out of the spotlight in favor of empowering, coordinating, and amplifying the efforts of partners. A decentralized approach carries numerous benefits. First, it avoids negative reactions to American intervention. Even if locals do not support extremist agendas, a desire to reject outsiders may unite them. Second, by empowering and supporting local actors, the United States can accomplish its own objectives while building the local capacity vital to preventing extremism over time. Third, by engaging vast networks of nongovernmental organizations, private businesses, journalists, and individual citizens, counter-extremism initiatives can reach farther, faster, and more effectively than the U.S. government and armed forces ever could.⁵⁹ It is not necessary for these groups to love America or agree with American policies. In fact, distance from American positions enhances their credibility with some audiences.

A decentralized approach also recognizes the complexity of violent Islamist extremism. Some extremist groups are only loosely affiliated with al Qaeda; others simply adapt the al Qaeda narrative to serve their own local ends. A strategy that seeks to separate extremists from their sources of

support must also sever links between al Qaeda and local insurgent groups. The United States and its allies should pursue a “strategy of disaggregation” that takes advantage of divisions between al Qaeda and local groups and seeks to peel insurgents away from the global *takfiri* network.⁶⁰ Yet the legitimacy and local knowledge necessary to neutralize these threats before they grow more powerful is found in the communities where these groups are active. Thus, local actors—whether military or civilian—should take as much responsibility as possible.

The imperative of taking a local approach applies to America’s official representatives overseas. As in counterinsurgency doctrine, a key principle in this strategy is to empower the lowest levels. Whether official representatives are diplomats, aid workers, or military officers, those in the field have the most knowledge and the greatest ability to adapt to local circumstances. They need a clear sense of mission and “commander’s intent,” operational guidance, and the resources necessary to accomplish their tasks. They should then be encouraged to execute that intent, empowered with the local knowledge that only they possess.⁶¹

This approach to countering violent extremism will require central authorities to relinquish control in return for greater effectiveness. Undeniably, this carries some risk. While leaders in the field will invariably make mistakes if given greater freedom, a level of experimentation must be tolerated. Additionally, foreign governments and militaries may abuse the training or equipment they receive. These costs must be mitigated through clear doctrine, coordination, and transparency, but they cannot be completely avoided. Though there are costs to decentralization, the opportunity cost of not empowering those with local knowledge is far higher.

2 *Since violent extremism is nourished by popular legitimacy and support, an effective strategy must deprive extremists of that support.*

Though the effort to target our nation’s enemies must continue, America’s goals must extend beyond preventing attacks and apprehending or killing terrorists. Neutralizing the threat posed by al Qaeda and suppressing violent extremism necessitates depriving terrorist organizations of support and legitimacy in Muslim societies.⁶² In particular, the U.S. government and its allies must staunch recruitment of the next generation of *takfiris*, thus precluding the movement from regenerating over time.⁶³ Such an approach recognizes that suppressing violent Islamist extremism is inherently a political struggle as well as a military one. Offensive operations, led by intelligence agencies and armed forces, are of great importance. But they must be supplemented by non-kinetic defensive operations that strive to undermine al Qaeda’s appeal and counter its propaganda.

As David Kilcullen argues in his companion essay, it is helpful to frame the threat from violent Islamist extremism not as a traditional problem of terrorism but as a global insurgency, fought in myriad locales and seeking to overthrow the existing political and social order.⁶⁴ Consequently, the struggle to defeat al Qaeda should be recast as a global counterinsurgency campaign. As in a classic counterinsurgency campaign, winning the allegiance of populations—the struggle’s center of gravity—is key to U.S. success. When terrorists lose the support of populations, they not only lose manpower, financial resources, and moral support; they also must fear populations who share valuable information with law enforcement or intelligence agencies.

The United States need not, and should not, attempt to deprive extremists of support alone. Local voices hold more credibility with local populations and are best positioned to gather

opposition to extremists. Americans can help to amplify those voices. By providing independent radio stations with security, American forces can ensure that independent broadcasts reach their intended audiences. By brokering partnerships between private information technology companies and local civil society groups, American aid officers and diplomats can connect new resources and communications platforms to the people who need them. By linking activists around the world, civil society organizations can convey critical new skills to counter extremist propaganda.⁶⁵

“A core objective of terrorist groups generally, and al Qaeda specifically, is to launch operations that provoke an overreaction by their adversaries.”

3 *Since overly strident responses to attacks generate more support for violent extremists, an effective strategy must be calibrated and prudent.*

A core objective of terrorist groups generally, and al Qaeda specifically, is to launch operations that provoke an overreaction by their adversaries.⁶⁶ Osama bin Laden’s strategy has always been to lure the United States into a protracted fight in a Muslim country, reinforcing the *takfiri* narrative and overextending American resources.⁶⁷ “All we have to do is to send two mujahidin to the furthest point East to raise a cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make the [U.S.] generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic

and political losses without achieving for it anything of note,” he said in December 2004.⁶⁸

In the years following 2001, the United States fell into this trap. By using language that inflated the threat from al Qaeda and bin Laden, the United States only glamorized and empowered them. By using tactics such as torture that run counter to cherished values and international law, the United States undermined its moral authority. By emphasizing the use of force and aggressive rhetoric to counter al Qaeda, the United States created the impression in many Muslim communities that the United States is at war with Islam. According to a 2009 report by World Public Opinion.org, 87 percent of Egyptians, 87 percent of Palestinians, and 80 percent of Jordanians believe that the United States seeks “to weaken and divide the Islamic world.”⁶⁹ Perhaps because of this sentiment, large majorities in predominantly Muslim countries endorse al Qaeda’s goal to “push the U.S. to remove its bases and its military forces from all Islamic countries” and significant numbers approve of attacks on U.S. troops based in Muslim countries. In Egypt (78–83 percent), the Palestinian territories (87–90 percent), and Jordan (66–72 percent), large majorities approve of attacks on U.S. troops based in Muslim countries.⁷⁰

Significant military operations, even on a large scale, will remain essential in some circumstances. In Afghanistan, for instance, the United States faces an enemy that cannot be defeated without the determined application of force to secure the population and kill or capture those who will never lay down their arms.

Yet the use of war to counter violent extremism is a decision that should be made with the full costs of that decision in mind. Wars give terrorists and insurgents critical fighting experience and build “alumni” networks able to call on each other for future causes. They inevitably cause collateral damage that can undermine popular support.

Wars are also rallying points for fundraising and recruiting. For instance, the U.S. invasion of Iraq provided a propaganda and recruitment boon for al Qaeda, becoming, in the words of the 2006 National Intelligence Estimate,⁷¹ a “cause célèbre” for *takfiris*. The majority of Islamist extremists traveling to Iraq were not the battle-hardened veterans who survived the Afghanistan campaign, but newcomers inspired by the narrative of resisting Western occupation. Thomas Hegghamer, a Norwegian analyst, surveyed 205 Saudis who committed suicide bombings in Iraq and found that only nine had previous combat experience.⁷² Iraq has served as an extremist training ground, improving the skills of fighters and teaching new recruits how to kill. New tactics are emanating from Iraq as jihadists from Algeria to Afghanistan learn how to deploy suicide bombers, to more efficiently kidnap adversaries, and to detonate improvised explosive devices with greater precision and effect.⁷³ Neighboring nations are dealing with an influx of fighters tutored in Iraq who may seek to destabilize their home countries. For example, in Lebanon in 2007, more than 50 Iraq veterans participated in the bloody battle between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese army in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp.⁷⁴

A pragmatic strategy will require greater use of non-military instruments of power to accomplish American objectives, which will require the reallocation of U.S. government resources. The Defense Department’s spending is approximately 350 times that of the combined budgets of the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), even though these agencies are equally central to the fight against violent extremism.⁷⁵ Perhaps counterintuitively, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has emerged as a leading advocate of devoting more resources to civilian agencies of government. During a 2007 speech at Kansas State University he said that, “having robust civilian capabilities available could make

it less likely that military force will have to be used in the first place, as local problems might be dealt with before they become crises.”⁷⁶ When force is required, it must be used at the minimal level necessary to accomplish the task at hand. Additionally, because militaries always risk intimidating local populations by their mere presence, civilian organizations should play leading roles whenever possible.

4 *Since ideology unites and strengthens violent extremists, an effective strategy must undermine that ideology’s appeal.*

A contest for “hearts and minds” lies at the center of a “population-centric” effort to cripple al Qaeda and suppress violent Islamist extremism. Countering the movement’s guiding narrative, discrediting its methods, and sapping it of popular support should be critical benchmarks of success in a new counterterrorism strategy. The United States cannot capture or kill every violent Islamist extremist. Therefore, limiting radicalization and preventing the recruitment of Muslim youths must be an overarching objective.

American armed forces and government agencies should not be at the forefront of efforts to undermine Islamist extremists. The contest for “hearts and minds” is happening largely within the Muslim world, not between Muslim societies and the West. Voices from within those societies are far more persuasive than those of outsiders. For instance, effective challenges to al Qaeda’s narrative have arisen from those who formerly supported the organization’s vision.⁷⁷ For those drawn to extremist ideologies, it is principally these voices, not those of the U.S. government, which will discredit al Qaeda and its narrative.

The challenge for the United States, therefore, is how to support and amplify the voices that can undermine the appeal of extremist ideology, how to support social networks that pull young people

away from extremist recruiters, and how to contribute to environments that are not conducive to extremist ideology taking root. The goal is *not* to make Muslims like the United States more, to convince Muslims of the judiciousness of our foreign policy, or to make sure they appreciate all that American taxpayers do for them.

5 *Since negative perceptions of the United States galvanize violent extremists, America must rebuild and extend its moral authority.*

In the eyes of many foreigners, the United States has lost moral authority. At least in part, these attitudes reflect displeasure with policies such as the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, the maintenance of secret prisons, and the torture of captured al Qaeda members. Controversial within the United States, those policies drew even wider criticism abroad, rendering allies reluctant partners and garnering support and sympathy for extremists.

America's moral authority has been tarnished further by charges of hypocrisy. Arabs expressed disappointment that the United States promoted democracy only to reject the results of elections in Palestine, called for an end to human rights abuses only to stand by the authoritarian governments that perpetrated them, and argued for press freedom only to pay journalists to write what the U.S. government wanted Iraqis to hear. Though these policies were contested efforts to balance competing interests, for many Muslims they wove a narrative that the United States did not live up to its own rhetoric and could not be trusted.

Strengthening America's moral authority will enhance U.S. power and undercut the appeal of violent extremists. Such authority confers legitimacy on the United States and U.S. policy, contravenes extremists' ability to attract recruits, and facilitates American actions around the globe. At a tactical level, it enables more effective

counterterrorism missions by giving partner governments political cover to cooperate with the United States.⁷⁸ And, in the area of intelligence gathering, moral authority can motivate individuals to share information. During the Cold War, some of the best intelligence sources sought out the United States at great personal risk because they believed in American principles.

To accomplish this objective, U.S. leaders must demonstrate through their words and deeds that America lives up to its values. These values are a source of power for the United States, as well as a moral imperative within our own society. By staying true to values that have wide appeal around the world, the United States offers an enduring demonstration of pluralism and the rule of law. This is not always easy, as evidenced by current debates over declassifying documents relating to the American torture of al Qaeda prisoners. Yet America is a country that faces up to its own mistakes. However painful this may be in specific instances, it remains both the right thing to do and the prudent course, contributing to America's long-term authority and influence.

6 *Since violent extremists are sustained by permissive environments, the United States must work to create conditions hostile to extremists, both at home and abroad.*

Terrorists use violence to create uncertainty, spread fear, and undermine a population's confidence in its government's ability to protect them.⁷⁹ Thus, the United States can minimize the impact of terrorist attacks by preparing the public to recover from attacks as swiftly as possible. This requires excellent emergency preparedness and response. More importantly, it requires government leaders to demonstrate resolve and prudence in the event of an attack.

Overseas, the United States and its allies can curtail violent extremism by investing in the future of

populations most vulnerable to the lure of violent extremism. Chief among these groups are young people in majority Muslim countries and Muslim minorities in Western Europe. While the causes of violent extremism are complex and numerous, political, social, cultural, and economic grievances aid recruitment efforts and provide a broader base of sympathy.⁸⁰ For instance, extremist ideologies appear to thrive among marginalized populations with limited economic prospects and few opportunities to channel their desires for change within a political process. While it is *not* the case that poverty, unemployment, or a lack of political participation lead to terrorism, those factors intertwine with concrete grievances, ideological appeal, social pressures, and personal relationships to create fertile ground for violent extremism.

As argued forcefully in the Arab Human Development Reports published by the United Nations, a large swath of the Muslim world is falling farther behind the rest of the global community.⁸¹ Political systems are too often rigid and oppressive, human rights too often abused, and economic opportunities too slim. The pressures on these societies are compounded by exploding youth populations, putting unparalleled pressure for resources on already strained educational institutions and economies. According to a major World Bank report, the Arab region alone must create 100 million new jobs by 2020 just to maintain current — and already high — unemployment levels.⁸²

While the U.S. government cannot and should not take responsibility for such a monumental task, it can work with international organizations, allies, and the private sector to address this urgent challenge.

7 *Since violent extremists exploit their own nuanced understanding of local and global trends, the United States must similarly enhance its own understanding of the local and global terrain on which violent extremists operate.*

Operating according to the principles laid out in this strategy requires a deep and nuanced understanding of culture, politics, economics, ideology, social networks, and the media. A significant amount of this information is openly available to those with the inclination to find it. Much is available by tapping into networks of scholars, business people, diaspora groups, and civil society groups. The rest requires painstaking intelligence collection. However, distilling this information in a form useful to policy makers in the United States and practitioners in the field requires an intelligence community with an extremely high level of foreign language skills and regional knowledge. It also requires a willingness to go beyond the “cult of the classified” and raise awareness of open source information such as Web sites, diaspora newspapers, and foreign broadcasts. It necessitates strong partnerships with foreign intelligence agencies in allied countries and a willingness to invest in the capacity of those agencies. Finally, it requires the long-term cultivation of intelligence analysts and operatives with the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct this type of work.

In addition to understanding current and emerging environments in which Islamist extremism can flourish, the United States must understand the identity, motivations, and goals of both al Qaeda and the many groups that are or could become affiliated with it. Understanding the local operating milieu of extremists — and especially where divisions exist and can be exploited — is critical. Countering violent extremism requires the empowerment of credible, local alternatives and the ability to divide extremists from popular support, which is only possible with a high degree of cultural and local knowledge.

A Realistic Vision of Success

A strategy to combat violent extremism should be constructed with clear, realistic end states in mind. Apprehending or killing every Islamist militant is not an achievable objective. There will always be individuals motivated by extremist ideology and rhetoric, and there will always be individuals willing to use terrorist tactics. However, the United States possesses the capabilities to eliminate al Qaeda as a significant threat to U.S. strategic interests and to suppress the global violent Islamist extremist movement. The goal must be to eradicate the capacity of terrorist networks to perpetrate attacks on U.S. soil and interests abroad and ensure that these groups do not replenish themselves with new recruits.

With these constraints in mind, the United States should seek to achieve clear objectives in the global struggle against violent extremism. A realistic strategy will steer toward the following ends:

WITH RESPECT TO OUR ADVERSARIES:

Al Qaeda loses the ability to plan and launch international terrorist attacks

The leading commanders and operatives are killed, apprehended, or on the run; physical safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan are abolished, and the group is incapable of reconstituting in another locale; virtual safe havens that serve as incubators of extremism are disrupted; access to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons is denied; its financing sources are drained; and it can no longer train new recruits.

Affiliate groups no longer pose an existential threat to home countries

Islamist extremist organizations with connections to al Qaeda are either neutralized or marginalized; they no longer have the capacity to commit significant terrorist acts; local communities have turned

against them; they no longer receive guidance, training, weapons, or financing from al Qaeda; and they perceive their grievances as local, with no larger linkage to a global jihad.

Semi-autonomous cells are dissolved or marginalized

Through vigorous action by police departments, intelligence units, and armed forces, Islamist extremists with connections to al Qaeda are apprehended around the world; individuals who remain at large do not have the capability to commit large-scale terrorist attacks; semi-autonomous actors are unable to recruit locally and are incapable of receiving training and guidance from extremists in other countries.

Recruits to the cause are few in number

Few Muslim youth become radicalized to the point of committing violence; those that are radicalized to this point are tracked by police and intelligence services and apprehended if plotting attacks; individuals receive no support from larger communities and struggle to recruit fellow Muslims.

The al Qaeda narrative is discredited

Al Qaeda's influence with its target population — Muslim publics — is largely eliminated; popular backlash against the organization's tactics, narrative, and vision grows; fewer individuals are drawn to extremist propaganda; more positive narratives spread.

Al Qaeda faces hostile operating environments, both real and virtual

Governments threatened by violent extremists can control their borders, govern their territory, provide basic services for citizens, and counter local insurgents and terrorists with limited international support; Muslim communities worldwide work

with law enforcement and intelligence units to identify potential terrorists in their midst; extremists are unable to use Web sites, radio, and other vehicles to garner widespread support without being contested.

WITH RESPECT TO THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES:
Resourcing for counterterrorism is robust, well allocated, and sustainable

Countering violent Islamist extremism becomes a “whole of government” mission; budget allocations for counterterrorism programming are economically sustainable and distributed appropriately across departments; planning, collaboration, and communication among agencies is efficient.

The government prevents attacks on U.S. soil and interests abroad

The most critical infrastructure at home and abroad is protected; U.S. and allied intelligence and law enforcement agencies work to detect, deter, and disrupt plots; the United States and its allies prevent extremists from acquiring chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons to safeguard against the most lethal attacks.

If attacks do occur, the consequences are managed and mitigated

Domestic authorities have a robust response infrastructure in place; the American people are prepared to take steps that will enhance their own safety and speed recovery from an attack; and they are resilient and go about their lives without fear.

Foreign governments cooperate in law enforcement, intelligence gathering, and attack response

Governments cooperate, share information about terrorist groups, and come to each other's aid in the rare event of successful attacks; key partner

states convene regularly to evaluate the shared challenges posed by violent Islamist extremism and to coordinate strategies and tactics.

Civilian agencies assume greater responsibility

Civilian government agencies in the United States and abroad play an increasingly important role in the struggle against violent extremism; post-conflict transitions to civilian leadership are early and smooth; civilian agencies have the skill, will, and resources to counter violent extremism and prevent its resurgence.

Civil society, businesses, and public-private partnerships provide economic opportunities and reduce the marginalization of Muslim communities

Non-governmental organizations, private businesses, and citizens create environments infertile to violent extremism; young people in at-risk populations have access to economic opportunities; non-governmental groups engage marginalized populations and minimize their sense of grievance; civil society condemns violent extremism and reduces the social pull of extremist organizations.

Ways And Means

To accomplish the objectives laid out above, a new strategy to combat violent Islamist extremism must employ a wide variety of tools in a manner consistent with the aforementioned principles. Success requires the ability to integrate these tools effectively, in support of a common strategy carried out by an array of actors both within and outside government.

Seven pillars should serve as the foundation of this unified effort: intelligence, diplomacy, strategic public engagement, military operations, law enforcement, finance and development, and homeland protection and preparation.

INTELLIGENCE

The intelligence community must play a critical role in the fight against violent extremism and al Qaeda by continuing to develop a sophisticated understanding of the threat, to gather actionable intelligence, and to disrupt terrorist operations. In all three of these areas, Islamist militants present a formidable challenge to U.S. and allied clandestine services. Violent Islamist extremists comprise an extremely diffuse set of actors and hold a wide variety of goals. Operatives are typically embedded within a diverse range of local populations and often do not come to the attention of intelligence services until they are in the late stages of planning an attack, if at all. Moreover, the goal is not just to stop specific attacks but also to eliminate entire cells and undercut their resources and support.

Despite its vast intelligence infrastructure, the United States will do well to ask what it can learn from others. Valuable and actionable information, both classified and unclassified, can be found by engaging American and foreign partners.

As part of a new counterterrorism strategy, the U.S. government should:

- Invest in the long-term human capital necessary to counter violent extremism, including

the acquisition of critical foreign language skills and nuanced regional expertise.

- Hire more analysts and operatives at all intelligence agencies, including the FBI, who speak critical languages, especially Arabic, Pashto, and Urdu.
- Engage networks of private citizens and organizations to inform American policies.
- Increase assistance, including training and technical support, to intelligence services in partner states; cultivate strong relations with trusted foreign intelligence services.
- Provide more low-level classified and unclassified information to state and local officials to ensure they are better informed of threats.⁸³
- Encourage the sharing of intelligence analysis, especially analysis drawn from unclassified sources, across government agencies and with operatives in the field at all levels.

DIPLOMACY

International collaboration is critical to countering violent extremism. The battleground in the struggle against violent Islamist extremism is mostly outside U.S. borders, and is met first and most effectively in those locales. Thus, diplomats must work closely with foreign governments to build partnerships, share information, and coordinate policies that undermine and marginalize violent extremists.

Not every nation places the same priority on suppressing violent extremism; some are either unable or unwilling to devote adequate resources to neutralizing extremist elements within their territory. The United States must therefore “convince, cajole or compel” partner countries to concentrate on defeating al Qaeda.⁸⁴ Effective diplomacy can strengthen the resolve of these nations and provide them with the necessary guidance, incentives, and—in some cases—resources. For instance, the budget of the State Department’s Anti-Terrorism

Assistance Program, which helps partner states improve their counterterrorism capacity, is \$141.5 million for fiscal year 2009.⁸⁵ However, there is room for improvement. A Government Accountability Office report calls on the State Department to better prioritize its funding allocations and provide recipient states with more guidance about how to spend the money.⁸⁶

In order to engage foreign populations as well as governments, American embassies must change. The State Department must allow diplomats to leave the embassy compound, even in the presence of security risks, and find ways to hire more diplomats willing to accept the risks inherent in service in combat zones and reward those who do. Diplomats should also be encouraged to spend longer tours in high-priority countries where violent extremism is a threat. The custom of cycling diplomats in and out of key countries such as Pakistan after just one year is not conducive to developing the sort of deep understanding and personal relationships necessary to implement this strategy.

While the promotion of democracy in predominantly Arab countries should not be viewed through the prism of counterterrorism, over the long run the advent of more pluralistic and law-based societies in the Middle East should help address some of the legitimate grievances held by extremists.⁸⁷ If governments are more responsive to the needs of their constituents—and provide forums for vibrant political and social discourse—then those nations are less likely to be breeding grounds of radicalism. Through their rhetoric and actions, U.S. leaders must continue to promote democratic values and the protection of human rights. The U.S. government should work both quietly and publicly with regimes in the Middle East to encourage institutional and other governance reforms. Yet as the past few years have shown, there are limits to what the United States can do on its own. Local actors, nongovernmental

organizations, and private groups will be the most effective and credible voices. The U.S. government should encourage and strengthen these organizations in ways that do not undermine their legitimacy.

As part of a new strategy to suppress violent extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Hire thousands more Foreign Service Officers and USAID employees to improve U.S. capacity for large-scale, sustained diplomatic and development efforts; provide them with the greater resources they need to do their jobs.
- Create “expeditionary” civilian specialists who can embed with military units and provide much-needed assistance in political, economic, and governance missions.⁸⁸
- Encourage diplomatic staff to leave their embassies and engage with local populations despite heightened safety risks.
- Increase funding for the Anti-Terrorism Assistance Program, while ensuring that money is efficiently disseminated to partner states; provide recipients with proper guidance on spending funds.
- Continue support for organizations such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and National Endowment for Democracy, but review programs to ensure that (especially in the case of MEPI) funds are well spent.

STRATEGIC PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Strategic public engagement—encompassing public diplomacy, strategic communications, and military information operations—is central to undermining violent Islamist extremism. The aim of this engagement is not to convince Muslim populations of the righteousness of American foreign policy or the supremacy of American culture. Instead, U.S. strategy should focus on countering al Qaeda’s appeal and sapping violent extremists of support.

This effort should advance three objectives: undermining popular support for al Qaeda and violent extremist ideologies; promoting positive relations with Muslim communities; and encouraging popular support for universal values such as human rights, the protection of innocent life, and political participation.⁸⁹ To do this, the United States must empower a wide range of persuasive voices able to counter the al Qaeda narrative and delink that narrative from local causes. It must send strong signals that the United States is not a threat to Islam. The United States must also build a dense network of positive relationships between Americans and predominantly Muslim societies to show that the United States stands for a better future for all the world's citizens, including Muslims. In all these efforts, the United States must demonstrate respect and support for the universal values that the vast majority of Muslims embrace. Though developing coordinated and effective "messages" about the United States and its intentions has a rightful place in a strategic communication strategy, the emphasis should shift to empowering credible voices outside of government and to building the relationships necessary to counter violent extremism.

As part of a new strategy to counter violent Islamist extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Invest the resources necessary to strengthen strategic public engagement in civilian agencies and let them take the lead whenever possible.⁹⁰
- Create a new public-private organization to engage, fund, and amplify private activities that undermine extremists and promote positive relationships with predominantly Muslim societies.⁹¹
- Create bi-national centers that offer English classes, access to computers and libraries, and events with American speakers outside inaccessible embassy compounds.
- Ensure that words and deeds recognize the vast differences among Muslim communities and that communications do not reinforce a narrative of "us and them."
- Work with partners and allies to replicate and spread successful de-radicalization programs.
- Conduct rigorous testing to ensure that messages and programs that are appealing to Americans are also appealing to the intended audiences.
- Expand exchange programs, visitor programs, and other initiatives that build positive long-term relationships.
- Fund projects, preferably those led by civil society organizations or foreign governments, which improve access to high quality education in areas where schools with radical Islamist curricula are the only or most attractive option.
- Develop a new broadcasting and media relations strategy for predominantly Muslim countries; reform and streamline the Broadcasting Board of Governors that oversees U.S. government-funded broadcasting; close or repurpose the U.S. government-funded television station Al-Hurra and redirect resources to more effective broadcasting strategies.⁹²
- Expand effort to get American officials on foreign media outlets, but also to get more credible and persuasive voices, including those of private citizens and foreigners, into the public eye.
- Provide education and training to public affairs officers to give them the skills and knowledge they need to engage effectively with a diverse range of Muslim populations; reward public affairs officers who develop productive relationships with local citizens beyond embassy walls.

MILITARY OPERATIONS

Even as the United States recalibrates its approach to marginalizing violent Islamist extremism, the use of force is still a vital component of success. The United States must continue to kill and capture terrorists, attack their sanctuaries, and destroy their capacity for action. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and

elsewhere, American forces will engage violent extremists directly for years to come. Yet in the campaign to defeat al Qaeda and suppress violent Islamist extremism, military force should be used judiciously.⁹³ The military response to the attacks of September 11th, particularly the invasion of Iraq, validated al Qaeda's narrative for many Muslims and increased the organization's legitimacy and support.

Treating the campaign against violent extremism as a global counterinsurgency campaign would lead the military to focus its efforts on providing security for the civilian population as the highest priority in areas where violence threatens core American national security interests. The focus of these efforts should be building the capacity of foreign armies, intelligence agencies, and police forces in order to transfer that responsibility to them as soon as possible. Once a mission relegated exclusively to Special Forces, the demand for more capable foreign partners is now so great that Foreign Internal Defense has become a core task for all elements of the U.S. military—one requiring broad changes in doctrine, organization, training, and mindset.

As part of a new strategy to counter violent extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Work closely with foreign militaries and civilian partners to deny operating space for violent extremists and protect populations from harm.
- Make strengthening and training foreign armies one of the U.S. military's primary missions in cases where American and foreign nations' interests align; consider building specialized advisory units to help host nations to deny operating space to violent extremists and to protect populations from harm.⁹⁴
- Continue Department of Defense support for expanded civilian capacity to conduct post-conflict economic and governance development activities abroad.
- Use drone strikes reluctantly, reserving them only for the highest-priority targets and where the benefits clearly outweigh the long-term costs of alienating local populations; reduce the current use of drone strikes in Pakistan.
- Continue to increase the number of special operations forces available to conduct Foreign Internal Defense and train indigenous forces; strengthen the relationship between conventional and Special Operations forces engaged in this critical mission.
- Develop a defense budget that builds the force structure and provides the specialized training, education, and equipment necessary to support current and future counterinsurgency operations; in particular, focus more resources on developing the linguistic and advisory skill sets that play such an important role in building partner relationships.
- Train soldiers to better respect local cultural mores and to use techniques that minimize the use of lethal force.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Especially outside of war zones, law enforcement agencies should play a critical role in suppressing al Qaeda and marginalizing violent Islamist extremism. First-rate policing and intelligence work not only disrupt plots but also lead to the dismantling of terrorist organizations.⁹⁵ Law enforcement is central to capturing weapons, monitoring suspicious activities and following up on tips, providing security to local populations, and developing relationships of trust that lead communities to share valuable intelligence. There are no quick fixes; the law enforcement approach requires a sustained response with adequate funding and manpower. Much of the expanded policing efforts must focus on states such as Pakistan that lack robust law enforcement institutions. To be successful, policing methods must be imbued with legitimacy. If police and intelligence agencies do not uphold the rule of law in all endeavors, critical popular support and

cooperation will dissipate. As in all elements of the strategy, the engagement of broader populations is essential.

As part of a new strategy to combat violent extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Build the capacity of law enforcement agencies in partner states, especially in areas vulnerable to violent extremism, and provide them with adequate training and equipment. Providing such assistance to Pakistan should be the highest priority.
- Develop greater channels of collaboration, communication, and information sharing with partner law enforcement agencies.
- Inculcate respect for the rule of law and human rights in partner law enforcement agencies, while being ever vigilant to uphold those values in American agencies.⁹⁶
- Develop new policies to handle detainees in ways that balance legitimate security concerns and the need for justice.
- End the transfer of suspects to foreign law enforcement and intelligence agencies that condone torture.

FINANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

Extremist networks require more than just will-ing recruits and technical expertise to execute successful terrorist attacks; they also need money. The sums required to initiate individual attacks are not always large. As a point of comparison, the September 11 attacks cost between \$400,000 and \$500,000, the March 2004 Madrid bombing cost an estimated \$10,000, and the July 2005 London bombings might have cost as little as \$1,000.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, violent extremist movements require additional funding to pay for propaganda and communications, travel, training, recruitment efforts, and larger organizational logistics. Thus, depriving terrorist organizations of financial resources must be part of any strategy to suppress violent extremism.

This is an area where the U. S. government has excelled, freezing the assets of terrorist financiers, crippling funding networks, and prosecuting individuals for funding terrorist acts.⁹⁸ In fact, the 9/11 Commission gave the government an “A-” for its initiatives to combat terrorism financing.⁹⁹ These efforts must continue, adopting new strategies as terrorists find alternative ways to move money around the world.

However, there are limits to how much the United States can accomplish on its own. Much terrorist financing emanates from the Middle East, sometimes through private donations, charities, and informal remittances called *hawalas*. The Obama administration must work closely with allies in the region to ensure they are tracking and shutting down these formal and informal revenue streams.

In addition to attacking terrorist resources, the United States must support the economic development of geographic areas susceptible to violent extremism. Though individuals are attracted to violent extremist movements for myriad personal, social, and ideological reasons, bolstering economic opportunities and increasing social mobility in these countries is nonetheless likely to help reduce the pool of potential recruits. There is no direct link between poverty and terrorism, but marginalized populations in economically distressed areas seem more vulnerable to extremist ideologies, whether those populations are in Algiers or in Liverpool.

As part of a new strategy to counter violent extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Build the capacity of foreign governments to disrupt financial networks that support terrorists.¹⁰⁰
- Through public-private partnerships and USAID programs, prioritize job creation in areas where young people are economically marginalized and susceptible to radicalization; work with multinational companies and educational institutions to

offer education and training opportunities that prepare at-risk youth for jobs.

- Through nongovernmental organizations and chambers of commerce, encourage companies to invest in areas vulnerable to violent extremism.
- Develop economic and trade relationships that build stronger connections between American and Muslim communities and create mutually beneficial economic opportunities.

HOMELAND PROTECTION AND PREPARATION

A continuing pillar of America's counterterrorism strategy must be to safeguard the nation from terrorist attacks. This will require efforts to prevent terrorists from entering the country, to conduct surveillance of potential terrorists who are American citizens or residents, and to detect and disrupt terrorist plots.

Homeland defense will also require the United States to harden likely targets without overspending. The United States must recognize that terrorist groups will always have more targets than the government can defend.¹⁰¹ America cannot protect every conceivable target from terrorist attack, but it can minimize the likelihood of attacks against highly symbolic structures such as the White House. And it can defend a carefully selected range of targets, including government buildings and vital infrastructure such as ports, landmark bridges, and transportation and cyber networks. It also necessitates a focus on preventing the most catastrophic forms of terrorism, such as those perpetrated through a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear attack.

Besides attacking a government's legitimacy, terrorists aim to produce fear in a society. To thwart this effort, the U.S. government should invest in rapid response mechanisms and foster a culture of resilience. The U.S. government, through rhetoric and action, should prepare citizens to respond to catastrophes, minimizing the impact of such events.

As part of a new strategy to minimize the effects of terrorism, the U.S. government should:

- Harden and protect only the most plausible and vulnerable targets.
- Ensure that resources are being spent wisely on homeland protection measures. Enhance border security while treating visitors to the United States with dignity and respect.
- Prepare the American public for possible attacks, take measures to instill resiliency and reduce the psychological impact of attacks, and encourage families and organizations to prepare themselves for emergencies.
- Work with the U.S. private sector to monitor suspicious activity involving biological agents.

Fortunately, the United States has not, like several European allies, experienced a successful terrorist attack from homegrown Islamist extremists. Muslims are generally well assimilated into American culture, and, unlike a large minority of Muslims in Europe, tend to be socially mobile. Yet Americans are not immune to violent extremism—and the threat of a terrorist strike perpetrated by a U.S. citizen is real. The July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on terrorism states that the “radical and violent segment” of the Muslim population in the United States is “expanding.”¹⁰² Several prominent homegrown plots have been foiled in recent years, including plans to bomb the Herald Square subway stop in New York. In 2009, intelligence agencies expressed concern about radicalized youth of Somali origin and their links to Somali extremists.

According to a May 2008 report by the Senate Homeland Security Committee, however, “the federal government has neither developed nor implemented a coordinated outreach and communications strategy to address the homegrown terrorist threat.”¹⁰³ Both the FBI and Department of Homeland Security have initiated aggressive

outreach programs with Muslim communities while seeking to build trust and communication with key leaders. Frequently, however, not enough coordination occurs with local police departments—the front line of counter-radicalization efforts—and no sustained funding stream exists for community-initiated projects.

“There are limits to how much the United States can accomplish on its own.”

As part of a new strategy to counter violent extremism domestically, the U.S. government should:

- Develop a counter-radicalization policy that recognizes the feasibility of a homegrown terrorist attack.
- Continue to speak out against anti-Muslim discrimination while publicly stressing the positive role that Muslims, like peoples of other religions and creeds, play in American society.
- Increase contacts between federal agencies and Muslim communities, while providing funding for communities to develop their own counter-radicalization programs.

ENSURING UNITY OF EFFORT

The threat from violent Islamist extremism is highly complex, with both global and local elements. It has no one cause, no one base, and no one solution. As a result, suppressing violent Islamist extremism demands a response that is equally varied, drawing on all appropriate instruments of national power, the capabilities of partner governments, and the cooperation of public and

non-profit organizations and individuals in the United States and around the world.

Accomplishing America’s long-term counterterrorism objectives must be the responsibility of the entire government, with the help of vast networks of private and non-profit organizations. Within government, the burden cannot fall solely on the shoulders of the intelligence community and the military. Law enforcement, diplomacy, strategic communication, financial controls, and foreign assistance are essential tools that the government must use more effectively, raising their importance relative to military and intelligence operations. Better coordination and communication among agencies will enhance effectiveness while making the most of limited manpower and resources. The need to develop better “whole of government” approaches extends far beyond the necessity to combat violent Islamist extremism. A coordinated interagency response, bolstered by strong partnerships with private actors, is required to address a wide range of other global challenges, from human trafficking to arms control.

The federal government is still coming to grips with the reorganization of the intelligence community and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Though these solutions are imperfect, further reorganization should be avoided. Reorganizations of this magnitude absorb precious time and energy; they should be undertaken cautiously. Instead, the new administration should focus its efforts on addressing critical weaknesses such as those in diplomacy, development, and public diplomacy. It should make existing institutions work better instead of shuffling organizational charts.

As part of a new strategy to counter violent extremism, the U.S. government should:

- Invest resources to improve interagency coordination, including joint training and education and mandatory employment rotations.

- Merge the Homeland Security Council and National Security Council.
- Create regional “hub” offices to serve as civilian counterparts to the Combatant Commands and ensure better interagency coordination in the field.
- Strengthen the central coordinating mechanism for strategic communication known as the Global Strategic Engagement Center.
- Create new mechanisms for public-private collaboration; streamline and clarify policies that unnecessarily inhibit collaboration with private corporations and non-profit organizations.

Ends, Ways, and Means: A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism

The long struggle against violent Islamist extremism is likely to take many forms. Though insurgencies in Afghanistan and Pakistan attract headlines today, new threats may emerge in Yemen, Somalia, or Western Europe. This is a global and complex threat that demands a global and complex response.

This response will call on the United States to engage a wide range of partners from around the globe: governments, militaries, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and private companies. All have a role to play, for their own reasons and in their own fashion. Wherever appropriate, the United States must have the courage to allow others to lead. In many venues, other actors—not the U.S. government or armed forces—will be more credible, more welcome, and more effective. Their success will protect American interests and American lives. Working with partners is a source of power, not a sign of weakness. As Anne-Marie Slaughter notes, “In the twenty-first century, the United States’ exceptional capacity for connection, rather than splendid isolation or hegemonic domination, will renew its power and restore its global purpose.”¹⁰⁴ Building the capacity to engage a multitude of

partners—overseas and domestically, within and outside the government—will also help the United States address the full spectrum of national security challenges.

In a much smaller number of instances, such as countering the insurgency in Afghanistan, only the United States will have the capacity and will to lead. In these instances, the United States must be willing to use force, but it must avoid overly muscular responses that are ultimately counterproductive. Force is, and will continue to be, an essential part of American counterterrorism efforts. But it should be applied at the minimal level necessary to achieve a given objective, after a careful review of strategic costs and benefits, and out of calculated interest—not anger.

Countering violent extremism will demand agile American leadership. Domestically, the Obama administration must build a strong bipartisan consensus to invest in the institutions and policies necessary to minimize the chance of attacks on U.S. interests and to endure another attack on the homeland should such an event occur. At the same time, our nation must avoid the trap of overstating the threat in order to build domestic support and assemble needed resources. Internationally, the United States must lead forcefully at times and quietly at others, marshalling dispersed actors and information in pursuit of a common and principled cause. The United States is uniquely poised to exercise this new kind of leadership to forge a new domestic and international alliance against violent Islamist extremism. This is a conflict no single party and no single nation can win on its own.

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APPENDIX A: SOLARIUM II EXPERTS

The following group of experts on national security and terrorism, retired military personnel, former diplomats and other government officials participated in conferences and panels on combating violent extremism. CNAS thanks them for their insights. Their participation does not indicate their agreement or disagreement with the findings and recommendations in this report.

James Adams	Janine Davidson	Mark Newton	Harvey Sapolsky
Alexis Albion	Zachary Davis	David Ochmanek	Tammy Schultz
Gary Anderson	Larry Diamond	Shannon O'Reilly	Sarah Sewell
Zeyno Baran	David A. Fastabend	Marc Packler	Steve Simon
Michael Beech	Michèle Flournoy	Christine Parthemore	Vikram Singh
Rand Beers	Price Floyd	Nirav Patel	Jim Steinberg
Daniel Benjamin	Nathan Freier	P. Dean Patterson	Jim Thomas
Steven Biddle	Kathleen Hicks	Camille Pecastaing	Emma Vialpando
Reuben Brigety	Alice Hunt	Eric Pierce	Ted Warner
Shawn Brimley	David Kilcullen	Neal Pollard	Kenneth Watman
Kurt Campbell	Aidan Kirby	Christopher Preble	Mark Winn
Roger Carstens	Daniel Levy	Lenny Richoux	Mark Wong
Gary Cheek	Anthony Lord	Nicolas Roche	Jaron Wharton
Derek Chollet	John Metz	Marc Sageman	Steven Zotti
Roger Cressey	James Miller	David Sanger	

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