

FUTURE TERRORISM MUTANT *JIHADS*

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The strategic decision to carry out 9/11 was made in the early 1990s, almost ten years before the barbaric attacks on New York and Washington took place. The decade-long preparations—and the testing of America’s defenses and political tolerance to terrorism that took place before September 11th—were a stage in the much longer modern history of the *jihadi* movement that produced al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers. Decades from now, historians will discover that the United States, the West and the international community were being targeted by a global ideological movement which emerged in the 1920s, survived World War II and the Cold War, and carefully chose the timing of its onslaught against democracy.

Undoubtedly, the issue that policy planners and government leaders need to address with greatest urgency, and which the American public is most concerned about, is the future shape of the terrorist threat facing the United States and its allies. Yet developments since 2001, both at home and overseas, have shown that terror threats in general—and the *jihadi* menace in particular—remain at the same time resilient and poorly understood.

Defining the war

The *jihadi* war against the Soviet Union during the Cold War—and the struggle against the United States and some of its allies thereafter—are all part of a single continuum. Over time, *jihadi* Salafists and Khomeinist radicals alike



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have become proficient in selecting their objectives and infiltrating targets. Indeed, an analysis of the security failures that made 9/11 possible clearly demonstrates that the hijackers exploited systemic malfunctions at the national security level.

Learning these lessons is essential for better counterterrorism planning in the future. But the *jihadists* are also learning, and the advantage will go to the side which can adapt most quickly. If the *jihadists* learn to understand and anticipate their opponents, their tactics and strategies will mutate.

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The first strain of mutating Islamist ideology is that of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. In his now-historic April 2006 speech, Osama Bin Laden confirmed his commitment to global, total and uncompromising *jihad*. "It is a duty for the Umma with all its categories, men, women and youths, to give away themselves, their money, experiences and all types of material support, enough [to establish *jihad* in the fields of *jihad*] particularly in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Sudan, Kashmir and Chechnya," Bin Laden has maintained. "*Jihad* today is an imperative for every Muslim. The Umma will commit sin if it did not provide adequate material support for *jihad*."¹

Bin Laden's latest *risala* (message) is as important as his initial declarations of war and of mobilization, laying out his most comprehensive vision so far. As this "world declaration" makes clear, the global Salafi agenda accepts no truth other

than radical Islamist dogma. All non-Islamist governments must be brought down, and pure, pious ones erected in their stead. Global *jihadism*, in its Salafi-Wahhabi form, is ideologically at war with the rest of the world. The conflict is universal in nature. It encompasses the entire West, not just the United States and Europe. Russia, India, and at some point even China, in addition to moderate Muslim governments, must be brought down. Like no other document to date, Bin Laden's speech outlines the final fantasy of the *jihadi* mind: world domination.

The second branch of *jihadism* is smaller, and concentrated in the hands of a single regime: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since its inception, Khomeini's Islamic Revolution has seen itself as universal in nature. And today, flush with oil dividends, it is rapidly expanding its influence in Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Similar to its Salafi counterpart, the Khomeinist worldview seeks to erect Islamist regimes, launch radical organizations and expand its ideology. But unlike in Wahhabism, the chain of command is narrow and tightly controlled; Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the unquestioned ideological head, while Iran's radical president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, decides the time, place and scope of the battles.

Future battlefields

By understanding the objectives of these forces, it is possible to extrapolate some theaters of likely confrontation in the years ahead.

Iraq

Today, U.S.-led forces in Iraq are battling al-Qaeda and other Salafi forces in the so-called "Sunni

Triangle.” In the south, meanwhile, Coalition forces have engaged Iranian-supported militias, such as Muqtada al Sadr’s Mahdi Army. U.S. and Iraqi forces will continue to battle on both of these fronts, in Iraq’s center and south. The Salafi strategy will center on classical terrorist attacks, while Iranian-supported forces are likely to attempt to infiltrate and take control of Iraqi forces. U.S.-Iraqi counterterrorism cooperation will continue to expand, but a decisive victory for Baghdad cannot take place before Iranian and Syrian interference has receded—and that will not happen until both of those regimes are weakened from the inside. Hence, American support for democratic and opposition forces in Syria (and by extension Lebanon) and Iran is the surest way to ensure success in Iraq.

Afghanistan

The consolidation of the Karzai government in Kabul is essential to American strategy, both as a bridge to a younger generation of Afghans and as a counterweight to the appeal of the Taliban. Al-Qaeda is committed to preventing such a development. It has a vested interest in causing the country’s post-Taliban government to fail, and in preventing a new generation of citizens from being exposed to non-Salafi teachings. U.S. and NATO forces therefore face a long-term struggle against *jihadists* in that country, both on the military and the socio-cultural level. Sustaining engagement there will depend on two factors: American public support, and the outcome of the struggle between fundamentalists and the government currently taking place in Pakistan.

Pakistan

Many of the components of the worldwide war with *jihadism* are con-

centrated in Pakistan. So far, Pakistan’s radical Islamists have been able to block their government from taking back control of the country’s western tribal areas and uprooting the fundamentalist organizations in its east. But potentially even more dangerous is the possibility that *jihadists* could take control of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal. In this context, the most serious threat to the United States would be the collapse of the Musharraf government and the Pakistani military at the hands of radical Islamists. Should this happen, the U.S. would be under direct nuclear threat from a nuclear-armed al-Qaeda regime—one that would have tremendous control over many other Muslim countries.

Asia

A major shift in south Asia will not only impact Afghanistan and Pakistan, but is likely to spill over into Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines, with ripple effects on U.S. allies Australia, Thailand, and India. The U.S. will be deeply and adversely affected by the expansion of *jihadism* in Asia.

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Iran

While the Salafi threat is likely to extend east into Asia, Khomeinism is likely to expand westward, from Iran to southern Lebanon via Iraq's Shi'ite areas and Syria's Alawite-dominated regime. Since its inception, the radical regime in Tehran has had a vision of itself as a great power, and consequently perceives itself to be on a collision course with the "Great Satan": the United States. The imperial vision of a Shi'a Crescent from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean held by Iran's leaders mirrors the Sunni Caliphate envisioned by al-Qaeda and its followers—albeit one with a modern twist: nuclear weapons. Bolstered by its partnership with Syria and the strength of its proxy force in Lebanon, Tehran today envisions a global confrontation with the United States. As such, the Iranian regime represents a cardinal threat to democracies in the region and, by extension, to the United States.

Syria

Ever since Hafez al-Assad chose to permit Iran to expand its influence in Lebanon, a Syrian-Iranian axis has existed in the region.² During the Cold War, Damascus was able to outmaneuver the U.S. on a number of fronts, chief among them Lebanon. By 1990, the latter had been abandoned by Washington to Syria. The Ba'athist domination of Lebanon, in turn, led to the ascendance of Hezbollah. But America's post-9/11 *volte-face* brought the dangers of Syrian-occupied Lebanon into sharp focus. By 2005, Syria had been forced out of Lebanon, but Bashar al-Assad remains defiant. Today, in the aftermath of Hezbollah's war with Israel, Syria, like Iran, finds itself hurtling toward confrontation with the United States.

Lebanon

Since the 1970s, Lebanon has been a key battlefield between the forces of terror and the West. The country houses a dense conglomeration of anti-democratic forces, ranging from Hezbollah to pro-Syrian groups to extreme Salafists. Since the 1983 attacks on the U.S. Marine barracks, the United States has altered its strategy toward Lebanon several times, but today, Washington finds itself forced to contain a rising Hezbollah and support a struggling "Cedar Revolution."

Sudan and the Horn of Africa

All the indications suggest that al-Qaeda is planning to open a new battlefield in Africa. In the speeches of Bin Laden and other Islamist leaders, Sudan represents a central arena of confrontation with the infidels, and a major launching pad for world *jihad*. The *jihadists* aim to thwart the international community in Darfur and reignite a holy war in southern Sudan. In addition, fundamentalists are expanding their influence in Somalia, and conspiring against U.S. ally Ethiopia. Here again, the U.S. and other democracies find themselves on a collision course with radical Islamists, even though international engagement in Africa today is essentially limited to humanitarian assistance.

Europe

With the Madrid and London attacks, the many plots foiled in Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy, the violence in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, the French "intifada" and the "Cartoon *Jihad*," Europe has well and truly become the next battlefield. Transatlantic cooperation could give way to tensions between America and its European partners, as Euro-

pean *jihadis* become a danger to the United States. Indeed, *jihadi* penetration of Europe, particularly Western Europe, is expected to facilitate the infiltration of North America.

Russia

Since the 2002 Moscow theater hostage-taking and the subsequent Beslan school massacre, *jihadism* has engulfed Russia. Wahhabism has already taken hold in Russia's southern provinces, and *jihadists* are thinking beyond Chechnya, toward the dismemberment of the Russian Federation. Russian strategy, for its part, has been peculiar; while Moscow has confronted fundamentalists at home head-on, it nonetheless pursues a policy of support for Iran and Syria—and, by extension, Hezbollah. In doing so, Russia's foreign policy has become antithetical to its own national security. The U.S. and Russia have a solid basis for collaboration against international terrorism, but unless Moscow abandons its tolerance of Tehran's radicalism, the two countries will miss a strategic opportunity to defeat world terror in this decade.

Latin America

While the Soviet legacy has mostly dissipated in Latin America, with Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba the last ailing vestige of the Cold War, it has taken just one decade for new threats to emerge. The populist regime of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela not only poses a challenge to liberal democracies in the region, it also serves as a conduit for foreign *jihadi* threats. With an alliance with Iran in the making and with an al-Qaeda and Hezbollah presence in the country, Venezuela is facilitating the activities of a network of forces inimical to U.S. interests. Deeper in the continent,

meanwhile, both al-Qaeda and Hezbollah have successfully put down roots in the Andes and the Tri-Border Region between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. With the long and porous Mexican-American border a major vulnerability, another future threat to the U.S. is brewing to its south.

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Canada

Finally, American security is also at risk from the north. Not only is Canada considered a passageway by which international terrorists can enter the United States, it has also become a site for the proliferation of *jihadi* groups. The arrests made in Toronto in the summer of 2006, and the coordination between U.S.-born radicals and their Canadian "brothers," are signs of a new era—one in which Islamists view the United States and Canada as one strategic arena for operations. Washington therefore will increasingly need to coordinate its counterterrorism strategies with its northern neighbor, despite the differences in political culture, institutions and attitudes.

The home front

For the United States, winning the War on Terror depends on two battlefields. The first is overseas, where Washington must confront *jihadi* forces and help allies to win their own struggles with terrorism. This

will require the United States to support democratic change abroad, both as a counterweight to *jihadi* lobbies and as a means of assisting Arab and Muslim democrats to win the conflict within their own societies.

The second, however, is closer to home. Homeland security planners must be thinking seriously about a duo of unsettling questions. First, are *jihadists* already in possession of unconventional weapons on American soil, and how can the U.S. government deter them? This crucial issue tops all other challenges, for a terrorist nuclear strike on the U.S. has the potential to transform international relations as we know them. Second, how deeply have *jihadist* elements infiltrated the U.S. government and federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and various military commands, either through sympathizers or via actual operatives?

As the recent scandal over the National Security Agency's domestic surveillance program has shown, the answers are fraught with complications. Five years into the War on Terror, the U.S. has not fully made the transition from the pre-9/11 legal counterterrorism framework to one based on intelligence, prevention and robust police action. And, without a national consensus about the seriousness of the *jihadi* threat, America will lose its own war of ideas.

The future enemies of the United States will be a mutation of current and past terrorist foes. In confronting these forces, knowledge of their ideologies, objectives and determination will make all the difference.

1. "Transcript: Bin Laden Accuses West," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), April 24, 2006, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F9694745-060C-419C-8523-2E093B7B807D.htm>.
2. For a comprehensive analysis of this alliance, see Walid Phares, "The Syrian-Iran Axis," *Global Affairs* VII, no. 3 (1992), 83-86.

