The fight against Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda, the principal terrorist menace to U.S. interests since the mid-1990s, has come a long way. The disciplined, centralized organization that carried out the September 11 attacks is no more. Most of the group's senior and midlevel leaders are either incarcerated or dead, while the majority of those still at large are on the run and focused at least as much on survival as on offensive operations. Bin Laden and his senior deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have survived to this point but have been kept on the run and in hiding, impairing their command and control of what remains of the organization. Al Qaeda still has the capacity to inflict lethal damage, but the key challenges for current counterterrorism efforts are not as much Al Qaeda as what will follow Al Qaeda.

This emerging primary terrorist threat has much in common with Al Qaeda in that it involves the same global network of mostly Sunni Islamic extremists of which bin Laden has been the best known voice. “Al Qaeda” is often broadly applied to the entire terrorist network that threatens U.S. interests although, in fact, the network extends beyond members of this particular organization. The roots of this brand of extremism, if not its most visible advocates and centralized structure, remain very much alive and in some cases are growing deeper. They include the closed economic and political systems in much of the Muslim world that deny many young adults the opportunity to build better lives for themselves and, often, the political representation to voice their grievances peacefully over the lack of such opportunity. Among other lasting causal factors behind the rise of Islamist terrorism are the paucity of credible alternatives to militant Islam as vehicles of...
opposition to the established order as well as widespread opposition toward U.S. policies within and toward the Muslim world, especially the U.S. position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, more recently, the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In short, even with Al Qaeda waning, the larger terrorist threat from radical Islamists is not.

That radical Islamist threat will come from an eclectic array of groups, cells, and individuals. Those fragments of Al Qaeda that continue to carry on bin Laden’s malevolent cause and operate under local leaders as central direction weakens will remain part of the mix. Also increasingly part of the greater terrorist network are like-minded but nameless groups associated with Al Qaeda, such as the Middle Eastern organization headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and regionally based groups with established identities such as the Iraq-centered Ansar al-Islam and the Southeast Asian Jemaah Islamiya. Many of these groups have local objectives but share the transnational anti-Americanism of the larger network. Finally, individuals best labeled simply as jihadists, who carry no group membership card but move through and draw support from the global network of like-minded radical Islamists, are also part of the picture. From their ranks, some will likely emerge with the leadership skills needed to organize operational cells and conduct terrorist attacks.

In a word, the transformation of the terrorist threat from the Al Qaeda of September 11, 2001, to the mixture described above is one of decentralization. The initiative, direction, and support for anti-U.S. terrorism will come from more, and more widely scattered, locations than it did before. Although the breaking up of Al Qaeda lessens but does not eliminate the risks posed by particularly large, well-organized, and well-financed terrorist operations, the decentralization of the threat poses offsetting problems for collecting and analyzing related intelligence, enlisting foreign support to counter it, and sustaining the United States’ own commitment to combat it while avoiding further damage to U.S. relations with the Muslim world. For these reasons, the counterterrorism challenges after the defeat of Al Qaeda may very well be even more complex than they were before.

**Uncertain Targets for Intelligence**

The small, secretive nature of terrorist plots and the indeterminate nature of the target—likely to become an even greater problem as the Islamic ter-
rorist threat further decentralizes—have always made terrorism a particularly difficult target subject. The mission of intelligence in counterterrorism is not only to monitor known terrorists and terrorist groups but also to uncover any individuals or groups who might conduct a terrorist attack against the United States and its interests. The greater the number of independent actors and centers of terrorist planning and operations, the more difficult that mission becomes. Exhortations to the intelligence community to penetrate terrorist groups are useless if the groups that need to be penetrated have not even been identified.

The U.S. intelligence community’s experience a decade ago may help it adjust to the transformation currently underway. Prior to the 1993 World Trade Center (WTC) bombing, the terrorist threat against the United States was thought of chiefly in terms of known, named, discrete groups such as the Lebanese Hizballah. The principal analytical challenges involved identifying the structure and strength of each group as well as making sense of the pseudonymous “claim names” commonly used to assume responsibility for attacks. The 1993 WTC bombing and the subsequent rolled-up plot to bomb several other New York City landmarks introduced the concept of ad hoc terrorists: nameless cells of radicals who come together for the sole purpose of carrying out a specific attack.

The term “ad hoc” was subsequently discarded as too casual and as not reflecting the links to the wider network that intelligence work through the mid-1990s gradually uncovered. Even with those links, however, the New York plots were examples of a decentralized threat in that they were evidently initiated locally. As demonstrated by the shoestring budget on which the 1993 WTC bombers operated, the plots were not directed and financed by bin Laden from a lair in Sudan or South Asia but rather by the operation’s ringleader, Ramzi Yousef, and his still unknown financial patrons. Now, in 2004, with Al Qaeda having risen and mostly fallen, the threats that U.S. intelligence must monitor in the current decade have in a sense returned to what existed in the early 1990s; only now the threat has many more moving parts, more geographically disparate operations, and more ideological momentum.

Much, though not all, of the intelligence community’s counterterrorism efforts over the past several years can be applied to the increasingly decentralized threat the world now faces. Even the intelligence work narrowly focused on Al Qaeda has unearthed many leads and links, involving anything from telephone calls to shared apartments, that are useful in uncovering
other possible centers of terrorist planning and operations. These links are central to intelligence counterterrorism efforts because linkages with known terrorists can uncover other individuals who may be terrorists themselves. Most successful U.S. efforts to disrupt terrorist organizations in the past, including the capture of most of the Al Qaeda leadership since September 11, 2001, have resulted from such link analysis.

The danger now lies in the fact that the looser the operational connections become and the less Islamist terrorism is instigated by a single figure, the harder it will be to uncover exploitable links and the more likely that the instigators of future terrorist attacks will escape the notice of U.S. intelligence. In a more decentralized network, these individuals will go unnoticed not because data on analysts’ screens are misinterpreted but because they will never appear on those screens in the first place.

The September 11 plot helps to illustrate the point. Retrospective inquiries have given a great deal of attention to the tardiness in placing two of the hijackers, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, on U.S. government watch lists. Had these individuals been identified, they might have been prevented from entering the United States and launching the attack. Ironically, less attention has been paid to what made al-Mihdhar and al-Hazmi candidates for a watch list in the first place: their participation in a meeting with an Al Qaeda operative in Kuala Lumpur. U.S. intelligence acquired information about the meeting by piecing together Al Qaeda’s activities in the Far East and by developing rosters of Al Qaeda intermediaries whose activities could be tracked to gain information that would provide new leads. Although skillful and creative intelligence work, it relied on linkages to a known terrorist group, Al Qaeda—linkages that existed because bin Laden and senior Al Qaeda leadership in South Asia ultimately directed and financed the terrorist operation in question. A decentralized version of the threat will not necessarily leave such a trail.

Muhammad Atta and some of the other September 11 hijackers were never even considered candidates for the watch lists because intelligence reporting had not previously associated them with known terrorists. In fact, one of Al Qaeda’s criteria for selecting the hijackers almost certainly was that they were relatively clean, in that they did not have any such associations. In a more decentralized future network, such connections are even less likely.

Yet, even a decentralized terrorist threat has some linkages that can be exploited, and this will be key to intelligence community counterterrorist ef-
forts from here on out. Within the networks of Sunni Islamic extremists, almost everyone can be linked at least indirectly, such as through their past common experiences in camps in Afghanistan, to almost everyone else. The overwhelming majority of these linkages, however, consists of only casual contacts and do not involve preparations for terrorist operations directed against the United States, as the meeting in Kuala Lumpur evidently did. No intelligence service has the resources to monitor all of these contacts, to compile the life history of every extremist who has the potential to become a terrorist, or to construct comprehensive sociograms of the radical Islamist scene. Detecting the perpetrators of the next terrorist attack against the United States will therefore have to go beyond link analysis and increasingly rely on other techniques for picking terrorists out of a crowd.

Mining of financial, travel, and other data on personal actions and circumstances other than mere association with questionable individuals and groups is one such technique. The potential for such data mining goes well beyond current usage. Yet, data mining for counterterrorism purposes will always require a major investment in obtaining and manipulating the data in return for only a modest narrowing of the search for terrorists. Numerous practical difficulties in gaining access to personal information, significant privacy issues, and the lack of a reliable algorithm for processing the data all inhibit the effectiveness of this technique. The September 11 attacks, however, significantly lowered the threshold for all investments in counterterrorist operations, including data mining, making this technique worth trying even if it appears no more cost effective than it did before September 11, 2001. The Transportation Security Administration already uses profiling to screen air passengers; the intelligence community might reasonably extend this technique to include profiling of foreigners to identify possible terrorists even before they buy an airplane ticket.

It is the U.S. population and the U.S. government, not the intelligence community, that will have to make the most important adjustment concerning intelligence operations. The reality is that they will have to lower their expectations of just how much of the burden of stopping terrorists that intelligence can carry. An increasingly decentralized terrorist threat and indeterminate intelligence target will mean that an even greater number of terrorists and terrorist plots may escape the notice of intelligence services altogether. The transformation in the threat itself coupled with the inherent limits of intelligence operations implies that more of the counterterrorist burden will have to be borne by other policy instruments, from initiatives to address the reasons individuals gravitate toward terrorism in the first place to physical security measures to defeat attempted attacks.
Fragile International Cooperation

The willingness of governments worldwide to join the campaign against terrorism has increased significantly over the last two decades—a welcome change from earlier days when many regimes, through their representatives at the United Nations General Assembly and elsewhere, were more apt to condone terrorism than to condemn it because of their support for “national liberation movements.” The September 11 attacks further strengthened an apparent global antiterrorism consensus. This apparent collective commitment to counterterrorism should not be taken for granted. Despite many governments’ declarations that they stand with the United States in combating terrorism, each decision by a foreign government on whether to cooperate with the United States reflects calculations about the threat that nation faces from particular terrorist groups, its relations with the United States, any incentives Washington offers for its cooperation, domestic opinion, and the potential effect of enhanced counterterrorist measures on its domestic interests. Such calculations can change, and the perceived net advantage of cooperating may be slim. In short, global cooperation against terrorism is already fragile.

Much of foreign governments’ willingness to help has depended on Al Qaeda’s record and menacing capabilities. The sheer enormity of the September 11 attacks and the unprecedented impact they had on the U.S. government’s priorities and policies have accounted for much of the increased willingness among foreign governments to assist in efforts to combat terrorism. The threat Al Qaeda has posed to some of the governments themselves, particularly the Saudi regime, also has helped the United States gain cooperation. The bombings in Riyadh in May and November 2003 were wake-up calls that partly nullified the numerous reasons for the Saudis’ sluggishness in cracking down on Islamic extremists in their midst. Most of the victims of the November bombing were Arabs of modest means; this sloppy targeting undoubtedly cost Al Qaeda some of its support in the kingdom.

Foreign cooperation will become more problematic as the issue moves beyond Al Qaeda. How will governments respond to a U.S. appeal to move against groups that have never inflicted comparable horrors on the United States or on any other nation or against groups that do not conspicuously pose the kind of threat that Al Qaeda has posed to Saudi Arabia? How can regimes be motivated to tackle Islamic groups that may represent an emerging terrorist threat but have not yet resorted to terrorism, such as the Central Asian–based Hizb al-Tahrir? Without the special glue that the attacks of September 11 provide against a centralized and directed Al Qaeda, many of the past reasons for foot-dragging in counterterrorist efforts are likely to reassert them-
selves. These reasons include the sympathy that governments or their populations feel for many of the anti-Western or anti-imperialist themes in whose name terrorists claim to act, an aversion to doing Washington’s bidding against interests closer to home, and a general reluctance to rock local boats.

Problems that the United States has already encountered in dealing with Lebanese Hizballah illustrate some of the difficulties in more generally enlisting foreign help against terrorist groups—even highly capable groups—other than Al Qaeda. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage once called Hizballah the “A-team” of international terrorism; the group’s 1983 bombing of U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut is second only to the events of September 11, 2001, in the number of American deaths attributable to a terrorist attack. Hizballah’s terrorist apparatus, led by its longtime chief Imad Mughniyah, remains formidable today. The dominant view of Hizballah in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East, however, is that the group is a legitimate participant in Lebanese politics: the group holds seats in Parliament and provides social services within the country. Despite the events two decades ago in Lebanon, including other bombings and a series of kidnappings of Westerners, Hizballah’s accepted political status has prevented U.S. officials from effectively appealing for cooperation against Hizballah in the way that the September 11 attacks have allowed them to appeal for cooperation against Al Qaeda. Notwithstanding the major potential terrorist threat it poses, Hizballah has not been clearly implicated in any attack on Americans since the bombing of Khobar Towers eight years ago.

An underlying limitation to foreign willingness to cooperate with the United States on antiterrorist efforts is the skepticism among foreign publics and even elites that the most powerful nation on the planet needs to be preoccupied with small bands of radicals. Even the depth of the trauma that the September 11 attacks caused the American public does not seem to be fully appreciated in many areas overseas, particularly in the Middle East. In addition, the skepticism is likely to be much greater when the U.S. preoccupation is no longer with the group that carried out the September 11 attacks.

Any reduced foreign support for the campaign against terrorism will not be clear or sudden. Certainly, no foreign government will declare that it now supports the terrorists. Instead, foreign governments may be a little slower to act, a little less forthcoming with information, or slightly more apt to cite domestic impediments to cooperation. Whether counterterrorism coopera-
tion weakens, therefore, will rest largely on whether and how Washington responds to the concerns and needs of its foreign partners. As antiterrorist cooperation becomes increasingly more difficult to obtain and more vulnerable to frictions over other issues, sustaining such cooperation will require increased sensitivity to foreign interests.

**Muslims’ Suspicions**

Skepticism and distrust among Muslims across the world about U.S. counterterrorist efforts have impeded international cooperation and may become an even bigger problem in the post–Al Qaeda era. With the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks disabled and Muslims—especially Muslims claiming to act in the name of their religion—still dominating international terrorism, Muslims will still dominate Washington’s counterterrorist target list. This fact will continue to encourage questions about whether the so-called U.S. war on terrorism is really a war on Islam. Many Muslims will ask whether a sustained counterterrorist campaign has less to do with fighting terrorism than with maintaining the political status quo in countries with pro-U.S. regimes. Other Muslims will see the campaign as many already see it: as part of a religiously based war between the Muslim world and a Judeo-Christian West.

The “war on terrorism” terminology exacerbates this problem, partly because a war is most clearly understood as a war against somebody rather than a metaphorical war against a tactic. The fact that counterterrorist operations have been aimed primarily at a particular group, Al Qaeda, has minimized this problem thus far. The less the fight is conducted against a single named foe, the greater the problem of misinterpreting the term “war.” The problem has been exacerbated by extension of the “war on terrorism” label to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Even though much of the violence that has plagued Iraq since the operation began is unmistakably attributable to terrorism, the U.S. government undertook the military operation in Iraq primarily for reasons other than counterterrorism, feeding Muslim misperceptions and fears that the United States also has ulterior motives every other time it talks about fighting terrorism.

Such perceptions among Muslims will strengthen the roots of the very Islamist terrorism that already poses the principal threat to U.S. interests. They will encourage a sense that the Muslim world as a whole is in a struggle with the Judeo-Christian West and foster a view of the United States as the chief adversary of Muslims worldwide. Given the fact that Islamist extremism is likely to continue to be the driving force behind significant terrorist threats to U.S. interests, fighting terrorism without the effort being perceived simply as a
war against Muslims may be a challenge that can only be lessened and not altogether avoided. President George W. Bush and senior U.S. officials have been careful to disavow any antipathy toward Muslims, which has helped to a certain extent. Most Muslims’ attitudes will be shaped more by deeds than by words, however, which means that U.S. policies toward Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular will be especially influential.

**Maintaining the Commitment**

The greatest future challenge to the U.S. counterterrorist efforts that may emerge with a more decentralized terrorist threat is the ability to sustain the country’s own determination to fight it. The American public has shown that its commitment to counterterrorism can be just as fickle as that of foreign publics. Over the past quarter century, the U.S. population and government has given variable attention, priority, and resources to U.S. counterterrorist programs, with interest and efforts spiking in the aftermath of a major terrorist incident and declining as time passes without an attack.

Important to keep in mind about the strong U.S. attention to counterterrorism during the last three years is that it took a disaster of the dimensions of September 11, 2001, to generate. Although intended to topple the twin towers and kill thousands, the 1993 WTC bombing sparked nothing near a similar amount of attention. Bin Laden and the prowess his group demonstrated with overseas attacks garnered full appreciation among U.S. government specialists of Al Qaeda’s intentions and capabilities by at least the late 1990s but still remained comparably unnoticed by the greater U.S. public and government. U.S. citizens and their elected leaders and representatives respond far more readily to dramatic events in their midst than to warnings and analysis about threatening events yet to occur. The further the events of September 11 fade into the past, the more difficult it will be to keep Americans focused on the danger posed by terrorism, especially that posed by terrorists other than the perpetrators of the WTC and Pentagon attacks.

The U.S. response to the March 2004 bombing of commuter trains in Madrid suggests how difficult it is to energize or reenergize Americans about counterterrorism. (Early investigation of the attack indicated that it was also a good example of the decentralized Islamist terrorist threat, being the work of Muslim radicals with only loose associations with Al Qaeda.) Commentary in the United States focused less on the continued potency of the global terrorist threat than on inter-allied differences over the Iraq war, with charges of “appeasement” leveled against Spanish voters for ousting the governing party in an election held three days after the attack. For most Americans, the difference between terrorism inside the United States and terrorism
against even a close ally is huge, with only the former capable of boosting their commitment to counterterrorism.

Here again, the “war on terrorism” metaphor appears problematic. Americans tend to think in non-Clausewitzian terms, in which war and peace are markedly different and clearly separated states of being. War entails special sacrifices and rules that the United States does not want to endure in peacetime. Peace means demobilization, relaxation of the nation’s guard, and a return to nonmartial pursuits. In U.S. history, in particular, peace has usually meant either victory or withdrawal and a rejection of the reasons for having gone to war in the first place, such as with the Vietnam War. Americans are not accustomed to the concept of a war that is necessary and waged with good reason but offers no prospect of ending with a clear peace and especially a clear victory.4

U.S. leaders have conveyed some of the right cautions to the public. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld correctly observed that the war on terrorism will not end with a surrender on the deck of the USS Missouri.5 Attitudes in the United States, however, probably will be shaped less by such words of caution than by the historical conception of war and peace. Moreover, not having a clear end is not the same as having no end—and the latter is, for practical purposes, what the United States faces in countering terrorism during the years ahead.

In fact, an end, whether clear or not so clear, will be even more elusive in the fight against terrorism than it was during the Cold War. Though the Cold War did not conclude with the signing of any surrender agreement on a battleship, its end was nonetheless fairly distinct, highlighted by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. It also entailed an indisputable victory for the West, achieved with the collapse of a single arch foe. Success in counterterrorism offers no such prospect.

The sense of being at war has been sustained thus far not only by war on terrorism rhetoric but also by certain practices that resemble those used in real shooting wars of the past, such as indefinite detention of prisoners without recourse to civilian courts. Although quite useful in mustering support for the invasion, the application of the “war on terrorism” label to the campaign in Iraq will compound the difficulty in sustaining domestic public support for counterterrorism in the post–Al Qaeda era. Even if the reconstruction and democratization of Iraq go well, the fact that this campaign will not
bring an end to anti-U.S. terrorist attacks elsewhere might lead many in the United States to question whether the sacrifices made in the name of fighting terrorists had been worthwhile. With so much attention having been paid to state sponsorship of terrorists, and to one (now eliminated) state sponsor in particular, further appeals to make still more sacrifices to defeat disparate and often nameless groups are apt to confuse many U.S. citizens.

More specifically, an unfavorable outcome in Iraq would mean that the Bush administration could face an increase in skepticism about the credibility of warnings concerning threats to U.S. security, including terrorist threats. Meanwhile, the existence of a specific, recognizable, hated terrorist enemy has helped the U.S. population retain its focus. As long as Al Qaeda exists, even in its current, severely weakened form, it will serve that function. Yet, when will Al Qaeda be perceived as having ceased to exist? The group's demise will be nowhere near as clear as, say, the fall of a government.

For the U.S. public, the signal that terrorism has been eliminated as a threat is likely to be the death or capture of bin Laden. Americans tend to personalize their conflicts by concentrating their animosity on a single despised leader, a role that Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein played at different times in history. This personalized perspective often leads to an overestimation of the effect of taking out the hated leader, as if the conflict were a game of chess in which checkmate of the king ends the contest. The euphoria following Saddam's capture in December 2003 is an example. Bin Laden, although on the run since 2001, probably has played a role in Al Qaeda's operations almost as limited and indirect as Saddam's influence was on the Iraqi insurgency during his eight months in hiding. Yet, this is where any similarities with Iraq ends. The elimination of bin Laden, if followed by several months without another major Al Qaeda operation against the United States, would lead many in the United States to believe that the time had come to declare victory in the war on terrorism and move on to other concerns. Meanwhile, bin Laden's death would not end or even cripple the radical Islamist movement. Fragments of the organization are likely to spread, subdivide, and inject themselves into other parts of the worldwide Islamist network, like a metastasizing cancer that lives on with sometimes lethal effects even after the original tumor has been excised.

**Context and Consequences**

Any erosion in the U.S. commitment to counterterrorism that may occur in the years ahead will depend not only on popular perceptions (or misperceptions) of the terrorist threat but also on the broader policy environment in which national security decisions are made. Available resources constitute part of
that environment. The resources devoted to counterterrorist operations may decline not because of a specific decision to reduce them but because any further reductions in spending for national security would reduce funds available for counterterrorism. Recent surges in both defense spending and budget deficits make some such reductions likely during the next several years. Departmental comptrollers seeking to spread the pain of those budget cuts will inflict pain on counterterrorist programs along with everything else.

Controversies over privacy and civil liberties constitute another part of the policy environment. The United States has already experienced a backlash against some provisions of the principal post–September 11 counterterrorist legislation, the USA PATRIOT Act. In the wake of the attacks, the U.S. government’s investigative powers expanded in some ways that would have been unthinkable earlier. As the clear danger represented by Al Qaeda appears to recede, pressures to roll back those powers will increase.

Any diminution, for whatever combination of reasons, of the priority the United States gives to counterterrorist operations will have consequences that go well beyond specific counterterrorist programs. At home, the impact would be seen in everything from reduced vigilance by baggage screeners to less tolerance by citizens for the daily inconveniences brought about by stricter security measures. Abroad, a weaker commitment to counterterrorism on the part of the U.S. public would make it more difficult for U.S. diplomats to insist on cooperation from foreign governments.

How long any reduction of the U.S. commitment to counterterrorism lasts depends on how much time passes before the next major terrorist attack against U.S. interests, especially the next such attack on U.S. soil. Time, as always, is more on the side of the terrorist, whose patience and historical sense is greater than that of the average American. Americans’ perception of the threat almost certainly will decline more rapidly than the threat itself.

The United States thus faces during the next several years an unfortunate combination of a possibly premature celebration along with a continuing and complicating terrorist threat. The counterterrorist successes against Al Qaeda thus far have been impressive and important, and the capture or death of bin Laden will unleash a popular reaction that probably will be nothing short of ecstatic. That joy could be a harmful diversion, however,
from attention that will be needed more than ever in the face of remaining problems: difficulty in cementing the counterterrorist cooperation of foreign partners, antagonism and alienation within the Muslim world that breeds more terrorists, and added complexity for intelligence services charged with tracking the threat.

The chief counterterrorist problem confronting U.S. leaders in the years ahead will be a variation on an old challenge: sustaining a national commitment to fighting terrorism even in the absence of a well-defined and clearly perceived danger. The demise of Al Qaeda will make the need for that commitment less apparent to most U.S. citizens, even though the danger will persist in a different form. Political leaders will bear the heavy burden of instilling that commitment, and they will have to do so with analysis, education, and their powers of persuasion, not just with symbols and war cries. No doubt, that will be a very difficult task.

Notes

4. One of the more thoughtful statements that looks to a “victory” against terrorism is found in Gabriel Schoenfeld, “Could September 11 Have Been Averted?” Commentary 112, no. 5 (December 2001): 21–29. See also Commentary 113, no. 2 (February 2002): 12–16 (subsequent correspondence about Schoenfeld’s article).