U.S. Grand Strategy and Counterterrorism

by Audrey Kurth Cronin

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Abstract: Ten years into a trillion dollar effort to answer the attacks of September 11, 2001, it is difficult to tell whether U.S. counterterrorism is achieving its intended effects, much less explain how it fits within a viable American grand strategy. As dramatic changes unfold in the Arab world, experts still debate whether or not the United States is winning the fight against al Qaeda.

While there is clear progress, terrorism remains a serious threat to the United States, its allies, and especially its Muslim-majority partners throughout South Asia, the Gulf, the Middle East and North Africa. Many questions remain. What are the full implications of the killing of Osama bin Laden? Has al Qaeda weakened, or merely evolved and metastasized? Is the outcome of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars crucial to counterterrorism against the United States? Are our partners countering recruitment and denying a safe haven? Is further radicalization and weak governance in Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere likely to lead to a resurgence of anti-U.S. terrorism? Is the upheaval in the Arab world undermining U.S. counterterrorism? Is the American homeland and economic base secure? And most important of all: Is the U.S. government ready and able to respond to a future attack?

These are complex but vital questions. And it is disconcerting that after years of effort few are confident of the answers. Assessing progress toward achieving an objective drives any good government policy, and it is particularly relevant to an enterprise as expensive, all-consuming and far-reaching as the so-called war on terrorism. In the present fiscal climate, and projecting ahead both at home and abroad, it is increasingly apparent that the United States cannot and should not sustain open-ended policies unless they are yielding direct results for U.S. security.

One reason for the lack of clarity is that terrorism is hard to measure. Unlike arms races or wars between states, terrorist campaigns always offer...
poor “metrics.” Classic military measurements—like territory gained, casualties suffered, or leaders killed—are inadequate, because terrorist campaigns exploit a position of weakness. No linear relationship exists between these indicators and al Qaeda’s ability to carry out terrorist operations. Even when al Qaeda appears weakest, it could be capable of its most lethal blow. That is why it is equally insufficient to dwell upon law enforcement statistics such as number of incidents, plots foiled, number of members and successful prosecutions. Employing such a framework before the 2001 attacks, most U.S. policymakers concluded that the threat from al Qaeda was waning and peripheral. They were dead wrong. Besides, neither a military nor law enforcement assessment takes into account the opportunity costs of spending American resources in this way. Without a broader analysis of the history, context, characteristics, and objectives of al Qaeda’s campaign—as well as its dynamic interaction with target states and their publics—such narrow approaches are inadequate and astrategic.

Another persistent problem is that, more than ten years into this fight, U.S. experts still disagree about what exactly al Qaeda is. Most agree that it is comprised of a core leadership, hiding in the Hindu Kush; a range of affiliates varying in strength and connectivity to the core; and individual operatives responding to the message. This is the sense in which the term “al Qaeda” will be used here. Especially with the death of bin Laden, virtually everyone agrees that the core has diminished, as has its ability to direct major operations. But a key challenge is deciding how to measure the threat from the affiliates: al Qaeda has always been a global organization, but the core’s current survival plan has been to attach itself to local conflicts in places like Somalia, Iraq, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Yemen. With the exception of Iraq, all of these weak states had local struggles that long pre-date al Qaeda’s interest, and each reflects different local dynamics that defy generalization. Serious analysts do not ignore the affiliates; they just disagree over the degree to which each one favors al Qaeda central’s global agenda and target set.¹

By far the most serious threat to the United States comes from al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP), the closest thing to a successor to al Qaeda central currently in existence. But only the vaguest generalization sweeps up all participants of all local associates to count them as al Qaeda “members.” Likewise, the potency of the third level, individual local operatives, is tricky to quantify. Recently arrested operatives in the United States have been mainly homegrown and self-radicalized, seeking out violent Islamist messages through the Internet, with do-it-yourself efforts (some potentially lethal) increasingly replacing formal al Qaeda training abroad. Successful or not, each homegrown case fortifies al Qaeda’s image: to build its brand, al Qaeda may take “credit” for the thirty-one U.S.-based individuals charged with

fund-raising, recruiting or traveling to Somalia to fight with al-Shabaab, for example, but the American government would be foolish to let them. \(^2\) The metrics are unreliable.

Objective measurements do not seem to matter to ordinary Americans anyway. Terrorism is an emotion-triggering business. In the wake of recent attempts by so-called homegrown operatives, and aware of the vast cost in lives and money, the American public has become so intolerant of risk that the next time there is a successful attack on an airplane, subway, hotel or major building, on (or even over) U.S. soil, the popular interpretation will be that we have *lost* and that “al Qaeda” has *won*. Without a realistic concept beforehand of what “winning” means, this view will be hard to refute. As things currently stand, in the wake of an attack, be it minor or major (and regardless of the party in power), the U.S. government will be criticized, partisan politics will surge, and the search for a scapegoat will begin; even as al Qaeda and its affiliates bask in the lionization that the public outcry will bring. Of course, the run-up to the 2012 presidential election is making this problem worse. If achieving perfect security at home is the standard by which we judge our efforts against al Qaeda, this terrorist campaign will never end, and American national interests will be diminished by the next attack.

Fear is not a strategy. Zero risk is a fantasy. To regain their balance and perspective after a decade of action and apprehension about al Qaeda, Americans and their government should return to the basics of strategic thought, particularly the relationship between ends, ways and means. Rather than concentrating on the usual, contentious metrics of counterterrorism, this article focuses on more fundamental questions: Do we have a clear strategy? Is it working? Is it integral to an effective grand strategy for the United States as we move forward?

Answering these questions requires scrutinizing both friend and foe, since terrorism and counterterrorism are intertwined. What follows first critiques the strategic approach of al Qaeda, assessing its performance within a broad historical context. Then it turns to U.S. counterterrorism strategy since 9/11, its intellectual underpinnings, core elements, successes, and limitations. Finally, it proposes an American grand strategy that incorporates effective counterterrorism for the future.

**The Adversary and His Approach: Pushing Tactics to Strategy**

Al Qaeda’s use of terrorism fits within a broader historical context rich with case studies of asymmetrical approaches used against modern nation-states. It is foolish to see this challenge as unique. The goal of every modern

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terrorist campaign, including al Qaeda’s, has been to push the struggle against a state or government from the level of tactics to strategy.\(^3\)

Terrorist groups typically lack the strength to confront adversaries directly. Instead, they try to use the shocking nature of attacks on noncombatants to enhance their relative power. Attacks against civilians are targeted for strategic effect, to transform a campaign toward the group’s political aims. Groups typically do this either by means of the target or the weapon—sometimes both. Attacks are targeted against innocents causing a stronger reaction than might otherwise be the case; or they employ means (suicide attacks, beheadings, explosions, airline attacks, etc.) that attract morbid attention and stoke fear. Acts of retribution, where a group simply tries to kill as many civilians as possible, can also occur, but these are less common, being harder to execute and subject to popular backlash.\(^4\) Terrorism’s point is to employ symbolic tactics to draw power from the state and then use that power to benefit the group or its cause. It is the passionate reaction by a populace to terrorism—be it fear, anger, intimidation, awe, inspiration, or another emotion—that gives the tactic its efficacy.

Because terrorist groups are weaker than states, they require additional leverage. They lack the wherewithal and the political legitimacy to act as if they were little pseudo-states. Instead, terrorist campaigns are uniquely well-suited to use “strategies of leverage” where tactics achieve strategic effects. These approaches have a well-established historical track record in the modern world. They leverage a position of weakness, trying to use outrageous attacks to achieve strategic results. Provocation, polarization and mobilization are classic examples, and al Qaeda has been employing and benefiting from all three.\(^5\)

\(^3\) In every campaign, there is a distinction between strategic or “outcome” goals for a terrorist campaign (things that typically relate either to the nature or behavior of a state’s government, or the identity of its population) or tactical or “process” goals (goals that serve the perpetuation of the campaign itself). Counterterrorism often conflates the two. For a full explanation of how this dynamic unfolds, see my How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns, especially Chapter 3: Success (pp. 73-95). See also Martha Crenshaw, “How Terrorism Declines” Terrorism and Political Violence Spring 1991, pp. 69-87; Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The Strategies of Terrorism,” International Security, Summer 2006, pp. 49-80; Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” International Security, Fall 2006, pp. 42-78; and Louise Richardson, What Terrorists Want (London: John Murray, 2006), pp. 98-100.

\(^4\) Brian Jenkins famously said that terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead. The fear at the turn of the century was that religious or millennial groups wanted both. Pre-9/11 mass casualty attacks, defined as those that kill more than 25 people, are analyzed by Chris Quillen, “A Historical Analysis of Mass Casualty Bombers” and “Mass Casualty Bombings Chronology,” Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, September-October 2002, pp. 279-302.

**Provocation:** Strategy is often about vanquishing a foe, but sometimes it is more about provoking him. Provocation tries to force a state to react, to take vigorous action that undercuts its own interests, usually by undermining the state’s legitimacy through an even greater indiscriminate use of force. This approach was the primary purpose for European terrorism during the nineteenth century. It was at the heart of the strategy of, e.g., the Russian group *Narodnaya Volya* (People’s Will). *Narodnaya Volya’s* goal was to attack representatives of the tsarist regime so as to provoke a brutal response by the Russian monarchy and inspire a peasant uprising. Even groups that claimed the violence to be an end in itself, including elements of the international anarchist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, expected it nonetheless to undermine the state and lead to popular revolt. Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella is an iconic theorist of this type of approach, and provocation was a favorite strategy for nonstate groups in Latin America throughout the twentieth century, as well. Other specific examples of provocation include the early strategy of Basque Fatherland and Liberty’s (ETA) in Spain, the strategy of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, and the strategy of the National Liberation Front in Algeria.

Yet provocation is a risky strategy. It is difficult to apply effectively because it cannot be calibrated by a nonstate group in the way that a wartime bombing raid or a retaliatory strike between opposing peers might be. Terrorist groups often cause states to behave in unforeseen ways that both undermine the state’s interests and kill the group. A government may be manipulated or provoked into unwise or emotion-driven response in the wake of a terrorist attack, an action that serves no one’s purposes. Everyone loses. Terrorism on its own is unimportant, but when it provokes a state, particularly in an unstable international context, it can kill millions.

Terrorism can provoke world war, which is precisely what it did in 1914. Of course, there were many factors contributing to the outbreak of the First World War; but the catalyst was clear. Nineteen-year-old Gavril Princip’s assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, was in itself an unimportant act following a long line of far more significant killings. The tactic had been prevalent in the West for decades, including the assassinations of the Russian Tsar, the French president, the Spanish Prime Minister, the Italian King, and the U.S. President William McKinley, Jr., in 1901, among many others. But because of international conditions in place at the time, not least Austro-Hungarian paranoia about Serbian nationalism, Ferdinand’s assassination had huge implications, setting off a cascade of

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6 Carlos Marighella (1911-1969) was author of the influential *Minimannual of the Urban Guerilla*, originally published in 1969. He wrote: “It is necessary to turn political crisis into armed crisis by performing violent actions that will force those in power to transform the military situation into a political situation. That will alienate the masses, who, from then on, will revolt against the army and the police and blame them for this state of things.” (Chapel Hill, NC: Documentary Publications, 1985).
state actions. Under certain circumstances, terrorism (a relatively unimportant phenomenon compared to war) may have outsized consequences for global stability, especially if a state has a faulty or nonexistent grand strategy to give it balance and historical perspective in the aftermath of an attack.

The 9/11 attacks provoked a major military response from the United States. To be sure, Osama bin Laden did not intend to elicit the massive U.S. intervention into Afghanistan that followed the attacks on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. By all accounts, bin Laden thought the United States would attack his Afghanistan-based camps again from off-shore. The military response surprised him; indeed, for bin Laden the apparent defeat of the Taliban in late 2001 hurt a key ally and diminished a vital al Qaeda sanctuary. Since then, the core of al Qaeda has been sharply reduced, kept on the run, and thus far unable to orchestrate a comparable attack—a huge plus for U.S. and allied counterterrorism.

While America’s pursuit of al Qaeda has taken a toll on terrorism, it has also altered the global security landscape. The attacks of September 11 provoked American military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq that tied the United States down in two expensive counter-insurgencies. There have been more Americans lost in these two theatres than were killed on 9/11, not to mention the high cost in lives among allies and the citizens of both states; and it is unclear whether the response has furthered American interests over the long term. These two insurgencies have also changed regional dynamics dramatically to the advantage of Iran, an unintended consequence that benefited neither al Qaeda nor the United States. Iran’s interests were well-served by the removal of both Saddam Hussein (with whom the Iranians fought a bloody war 1980-1988) and the Taliban (with whom the Iranians virtually went to war in 1998).

The course and aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may help to determine both Iran’s and al Qaeda’s long-term gains. Much will depend upon how the United States disengages, the strength, character and legitimacy of the governments left behind (an active source of concern in both cases), and the future relationship between the United States and Iran. As American troops leave Iraq now that war is officially over, Middle East analysts will be watching

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closely. A certain outcome of the wars is that the ability of Iraq and Afghanistan to resist external interference by Iran will likely have diminished, and the incentives for countervailing action by their neighbors will have increased.  

As abhorrent as both the Saddam Hussein and Taliban regimes were, they at least provided restraint to Iran’s regional influence. The geographical implications of Iran’s less fettered position in the heart of an oil-rich region could have serious long-term consequences. Many future scenarios could unfold: with respect to long-term American interests, al Qaeda’s ability to threaten the United States, even from a new safe haven (if one develops), could pale by comparison to a post-U.S. Iraq that is newly-aligned with Iran. Along with the related fiscal strains on American economic power, the long-term geopolitical implications of U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan would have the father of geopolitical strategy, Sir Halford Mackinder, rolling over in his grave.

**Polarization:** Polarization is a second strategy of leverage used by terrorist organizations. It tries to divide and de-legitimize a government, by directly attacking the domestic politics of a state. It often drives regimes sharply to the right, forcing populations to choose between the terrorist cause and brutal state repression. The goal is to pry divided populations further apart, fragmenting societies so that it is impossible to maintain a moderate middle within a functioning state. Aiming to widen ethnic, sectarian and other cleavages among populations, polarization is an attractive approach against democracies. It regularly surfaced during the twentieth century. But as was the case with the strategy of provocation, polarization often leads to unintended consequences. Examples of other groups that deliberately tried to polarize societies include the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in Sri Lanka and the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in Northern Ireland. Terrorist activities in Germany, Austria and Hungary after World War I were meant to polarize, and they played a role in the arrival of World War II. But there are more recent familiar U.S. examples, as well: in 1996, Timothy McVeigh claimed that he was trying to polarize American society by targeting the Murrah Federal Government Building in Oklahoma City to set off a race war in the United States.

An archetypal illustration of a polarization strategy is offered by the Tupamaros of Uruguay. In the early 1960s, Uruguay had a robust party system, an educated, urban population, and an established democratic tradition. Positioning themselves as populists, the Tupamaros targeted symbols of the “imperialist regime,” including businesses, airports and diplomatic facilities. Gradually they increased the audacity of their attacks, leading to paranoia...
in the business community and the landed elite, and a sharp political shift to the right. Even as it temporarily suspended all constitutional rights, the Uruguayan government tried to enforce the rule of law. But the police were unable to restore calm and eventually the government called upon the army. By the end of 1972, the army had crushed the group. Even though terrorist attacks had ended and there was no serious threat from the Tupamaros, the Uruguayan army then carried out a coup, dissolved Parliament and ruled the country for the next twelve years. In Uruguay, a polarization strategy drove the government to destroy itself.

Al Qaeda has resorted to polarization, notably in Iraq through its affiliate al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi deliberately targeted Shias and their shrines, including the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006, virtually setting off a civil war. In addition to targeting places of worship, Zarqawi engaged in brutal, video-taped beheadings, and employed women and children as suicide bombers. In 2005, second-in-command Ayman Zawahiri’s captured letter to Zarqawi accurately diagnosed the perils of such an approach. In it, he wrote, “My opinion is that this matter won’t be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it.” He was correct. Zarqawi was targeted and killed shortly thereafter. The Iraq Surge followed, involving more U.S. troops and a new counterinsurgency strategy, but also taking advantage of a crucial shift in attitude of Sunni sheiks, angered and repulsed by the murderous leadership of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Al Qaeda’s polarizing attacks continued to have important effects within Iraq, contributing to the difficulties in forming a unified government between Shia and Sunni, threatening American hopes for a strong, stable ally in the region. Score one for al Qaeda’s tactics. But from the perspective of the organization’s aims over the longer term, there was again a serious degradation in its global standing, a classic case of a tactical approach undermining a far more important aim of unifying the Muslim umma (total community) behind al Qaeda’s goals. Strategically, polarization was a failed approach for al Qaeda. However, there is evidence that al Qaeda is attempting to employ this strategy again in the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq.

Mobilization: Mobilization is the third strategy of leverage for modern terrorism campaigns. Mobilization attempts to recruit and rally the masses to the cause. This strategy was at the core of Maoist movements in the twentieth century, occurring within the first part of Mao’s three-phase protracted war. Terrorist attacks may be intended to inspire current and potential supporters of a group, once again using the reaction of the state as a means, not an end. This is what the campaign of bombings and assassinations in the late nineteenth century did for the global anarchist movement, for example, and the 1972

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Munich Olympics massacre did for Palestinian nationalism. When terrorist attacks are used to mobilize, they are not necessarily directed toward changing the behavior of the state at all; they aim instead to invigorate and energize potential recruits and raise a group’s profile internationally, drawing resources, sympathizers and allies.

There is a historical pattern to these three leverage strategies. Each is directly connected to the international system and the vulnerabilities of the states within it. As in war, terrorist campaigns threaten or make strikes in arenas that best exploit states’ vulnerabilities. Provocation especially suited the nineteenth century in Europe because of the aging and brittle autocratic regimes. Polarization was at the core of the Marxist movements in the early years of the twentieth century, some of which successfully transitioned from terrorism to more traditional guerrilla warfare, and eventually to conventional warfare. It reappeared at the end of the twentieth century with terrorist attacks designed to polarize along racial, religious, tribal, linguistic or ethnic lines, cutting the heart out of weak or newly consolidating states. Today mobilization is uniquely well-suited to the current context, with its sweeping changes in communications and economic ties, porous borders and dramatic cultural and political developments. For good or ill, modern states are struggling to influence or even control the transnational sweep of twenty-first century communications, slapping new dimensions onto a tidy Westphalian map.

Among these three strategies of leverage, al Qaeda has preferred mobilization. Bin Laden’s longstanding goal was to awaken and unite the Muslim umma in support of al Qaeda’s weird Salafist (violent jihadist) vision for Islam. In a global environment of democratized communications, an increase in public access, a sharp reduction in cost, a growth in frequency of messages, and an exploitation of images, groups such as al Qaeda are able to enhance the effects of terrorist attacks in a way that is unprecedented. The result is an image of power and strength, inspirational to some potential followers. If a terrorist group such as al Qaeda is successful in mobilizing large numbers, this approach prolongs the fight and enables an inherently weak tactic—terrorism—to morph into much stronger forms with greater staying power, such as insurgency and conventional war. Keeping the movement alive all depends on whether terrorists are able to capture the dreams and imaginations of potential recruits and supporters.

Fortunately, al Qaeda’s track record with respect to mobilization is mixed, not least because the group is playing in an increasingly crowded and hostile field. Support for al Qaeda among the Muslim umma has dropped

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14 I am not arguing that the ideologies of the two movements have anything in common, only aspects of their organization, behavior and global effects by a relatively small number of operatives. See the debates on anarchism and al-Qaeda in Terrorism and Political Violence, October 2008, pp. 563-611.

sharply in recent years, as a result of repulsion at the use of suicide attacks and the killing of large numbers of Muslim civilians, as well as greater interest in more secular democratic principles that are anathema to al Qaeda. For example, according to the Pew Global Attitudes project, between 2003 and 2009, support for bin Laden had sharply dropped in Indonesia (59 percent to 25 percent), Pakistan (46 percent to 18 percent) and Jordan (56 percent to 28 percent). In Pakistan, where bin Laden was hiding, general support for al Qaeda dropped from 25 percent in 2008 to 9 percent in 2009. Pakistanis are the strongest public voice against suicide attacks: in the wake of the September 11th attacks, one-third of Pakistanis supported suicide attacks “to defend Islam,” but in 2009, 87 percent said that such attacks are never justified. Experiencing al Qaeda’s violence up-close-and-in-person consistently results in popular backlash against the group.

But al Qaeda’s loss is not necessarily the United States’ gain. Because of the erosion of popular support due to the killing of Muslim civilians, al Qaeda leaders have concluded that their followers should attempt to kill more non-Muslim Western civilians. In the past two years, there has been a two-way shift in the threat of al Qaeda attacks downwards, to further radicalization of individual American and European citizens launching smaller attacks (or near-misses); and sideways, to reinvigorated al Qaeda affiliates, some of which have moved from local to global agendas for the first time, including al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. From the American perspective, this is the sobering downside of al Qaeda’s setbacks: the broader reach of al Qaeda-associated groups and greater incentives to achieve a successful operation in the West.

How is al Qaeda Doing?

In analyzing al Qaeda’s strategy, the foregoing is a quick summary of what a traditional war college curriculum might label “means” and “ways.” Despite the death of its leader, al Qaeda clearly continues to be dangerous through the spread of its associates and the evolution in its tactics. But how about “ends”? Has the campaign made progress toward its central objectives?

Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Zawahiri consistently expressed three vital goals for al Qaeda. The first objective has been to remove Western troops and influence from the Middle East, an aim that has not been achieved; indeed, the trend has been in the opposite direction. It is true that most U.S. troops were withdrawn from Saudi Arabia in 2003, reducing total numbers from about 10,000 in the Spring of 2003 to several hundred now, and essentially satisfying bin Laden’s demand that “infidel” troops be removed from the region. But al Qaeda’s military goals have not been achieved.

16 This argument is further developed in my article, “The Evolution of Counterterrorism: Will Tactics Trump Strategy?” International Affairs, July 2010, pp. 837-856.
The Land of the Two Holy Places. But these withdrawals have been more than outweighed by the increased presence of Westerners involved in major operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as those stationed in Qatar, Bahrain, Algeria, Yemen, the Philippines, and many other places.

Al Qaeda’s second goal has been the fall of U.S.- and Western-backed Arab regimes, an objective being achieved by an unrelated series of popular uprisings that threaten to demonstrate the terrorist group’s irrelevance. The entire political landscape of the Arab world is being reshaped before our eyes, in what is now being termed the Great Arab Revolt. It is too early to say how events will unfold, especially in Libya, now that dictator Muammar Ghaddafi has been killed. But the Arab Spring was not an al Qaeda-sponsored or inspired wave of change. Talk of democracy is anathema to al Qaeda.

The final goal of al Qaeda has been to reinstate an Islamic Caliphate or Khilafa. There is no evidence to suggest that this goal is achievable. In many ways, the Arab Spring is moving in the opposite direction of the creation of an Islamic territorial state in which there would be installed a conservative, Taliban-style government ruled directly by God and guided by literal readings of the Qur’an and the hadith, so as to return the Muslim umma to the piety and strength enjoyed during the life of the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. This religious vision was not the inspiration shared by the forces of change in Tunisia and Egypt, where mainly young secular protesters engaged in a broad-based popular uprising that overthrew dictators. The electoral heft of the Muslim Brotherhood and continued power of the miliary in Egypt may confound this vision, but neither supports al Qaeda. It is an open question what will happen in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan—or, for that matter, Syria, Jordan, Algeria or Saudi Arabia (if they are affected). But despite its best efforts, al Qaeda has been thus far irrelevant to the tectonic shift unfolding in the Arab World.

Time and again, al Qaeda repels rather than attracts. The group receives appalling public opinion ratings among their purported constituency: for example, only two percent of Muslims in Lebanon, five percent in Turkey, and 15 percent in Jordan support al Qaeda. Before his death, the favorability ratings for Osama bin Laden had dropped off a cliff: in Jordan they went from 56 percent in 2003 to 13 percent in 2011 and in Pakistan from 52 percent in 2005 to 18 percent in 2011. While important symbolically, and to some extent operationally, Osama bin Laden’s death is, in some respects, more important in the West than it is among Muslim populations.

A key reason for al Qaeda’s failure has been its inability to mobilize popular support behind its vision of the future—a picture that does not capture

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18 The phrase is used in al Qaeda recruitment videos, referring to the sacred mosques in Mecca and Medina.

the dreams and imaginations of most young people in the Arab world and beyond. It is too early to determine how these changes will turn out: al Qaeda might yet exploit conditions of chaos, especially in ripe conditions like those in Yemen. But they are not driving this shift. As for all terrorist groups, the central argument of al Qaeda is that the only way to achieve change is through violence. In Egypt and Tunisia, at least, that empty narrative has been obliterated by forces separate from either al Qaeda or, for that matter, the United States.

Al Qaeda is failing to achieve its strategic objectives. How is the United States doing?

The United States and its Counterterrorism Approach: ‘Means’ and ‘Ways’

The United States’ approach to counterterrorism continues to evolve. Since 9/11, there have been six broad dimensions. The top priority following the attacks was to exact punishment, remove the threat and show resolve. A small number of Americans orchestrated an operation in Afghanistan that relied primarily on indigenous forces to attack al Qaeda, as well as dismantle the Taliban regime that had sheltered it. This was followed by a determination to fight forward, to deny sanctuary through broad counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan so as to prevent attacks before they occurred. Next came a decision to rely more heavily upon decapitation tactics, targeting special operations against individual cells and leaders, and ramping up drone attacks against al Qaeda leaders in the frontier regions of Pakistan and in Yemen. Indeed, by the end of the decade, the target list had expanded beyond al Qaeda leaders to include operatives primarily threatening the Pakistani state, such as members of Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani network. As American forces grew in Afghanistan, the growing deployment of drones was stunning, going from nine strikes over the first three years of the program (2004-7) to 205 over the succeeding three years (2008-2010). Hunkered down in the border region


between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the core of al Qaeda was reduced and the scope of American targets grew.

In addition to punishment, the denial of sanctuary, and decapitation strikes, other pillars of U.S. counterterrorism policy have included building partnership capacity, shoring up the homeland, and countering violent extremism. There has been considerable success in sharing information and severing support networks by working with other countries. Most dramatic were initiatives put in place by key U.S. partners who suddenly found themselves directly under fire, including Morocco, Singapore, Indonesia, Jordan, and especially Saudi Arabia, whose security budget in the wake of lethal attacks on housing compounds in Riyadh and Al-Khobar rose from $8.5 billion in 2004 to $12 billion in 2006.\(^\text{23}\) Shoring up the U.S. homeland likewise received attention, especially airline and border security, but also some $33 billion in grant funding for homeland security assistance to states, specified urban areas and critical infrastructures (such as ports and rail systems).\(^\text{24}\) At the end of the decade, the Obama Administration launched a vigorous effort to counter violent extremism by targeting the apparent sources of radicalization in communities.\(^\text{25}\) Still, American military approaches were by far the best funded throughout the decade: of the $1.121 trillion enacted in the so-called Global War on Terror by 2010, about $1.1 trillion or 94 percent, went to the Department of Defense.\(^\text{26}\)

American counterterrorism initiatives have yielded both progress and setbacks. On the positive side, the absence of high-casualty attacks on the U.S. homeland in this period was an important accomplishment. Whether the result of effective counterterrorism or luck (usually both), in the decade after 9/11, the total number of deaths from al Qaeda-associated attacks in the United States was only 17, with the majority (13) suffered when Major Nidal Hasan


opened fire at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009. While each death was a tragedy, al Qaeda had failed to orchestrate a spectacular sequel on U.S. soil—despite a strong desire and stated intention to do so. Counterterrorism progress on the global front was embodied in a robust, emerging coalition between states, especially in the intelligence area but also terrorist financing. And no global “clash of civilizations” was underway: some of the most beneficial cooperation was between Muslim and non-Muslim states, with the most violent clashes and highest death tolls occurring within a civilization. Looking anxiously ahead on September 12, 2001, few Americans could have expected such an outcome ten years hence, and U.S. counterterrorism policy deserves some credit for these achievements.

Not all success can be chalked up to deliberate U.S. policy. Quite apart from American actions, al Qaeda’s tragic killing of a large number of its own supposed constituents set off a widespread Muslim backlash against it—and the United States struggled to grasp the unfolding dynamic and get out of the way. Prominent critics included Sheikh Salman Al-Oday, a well-known Saudi religious scholar popular among young Muslims, who in a 2007 television program publicly asked bin Laden, “Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions [of victims] on your back?” The next year, then-second-in-command Ayman Zawahiri feebly tried to regain momentum and popular legitimacy by holding an open Internet forum. Answering questions submitted in advance, he met the charge of killing Muslims with, “We haven’t killed the innocents, not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria nor anywhere else. If there is any innocent who was killed in the mujahedeen’s operations, then it was either an unintentional error or out of necessity.” According to Zawahiri, Muslims who died on Western soil had only themselves to blame, since they were living among infidels. It was a shabby performance: the core of al Qaeda was decaying.

U.S. interests have also suffered from al Qaeda’s devolution. Two developments are particularly pernicious: the growth of homegrown terrorists,

28 Again, this ‘metric” should be treated with care, however. In the period before 9/11, the number of attacks on American soil was zero.
31 Given Zawahiri’s widely unpopular positions and repulsive personality, I am not convinced that removal of his leadership is necessarily preferable to allowing him to continue as bin Laden’s successor.
and the determination of more al Qaeda affiliates to take the fight to the American homeland.

In recent years, more homegrown operatives have begun to emerge in the West where the number of successful or attempted attacks on U.S. soil has grown. In 2009 and 2010, the number of cases involving U.S. citizens or residents was 76, a threefold increase over the prior two years. These included a chilling near-miss by U.S. legal resident Najibullah Zazi, who tried to target the New York subway system with a TATP bomb similar to the kitchen-built bombs used in the deadly 7/7 London attacks; and a barely-averted operation by American citizen Faisal Shahzad, who tried to kill hundreds in New York’s heavily-populated Times Square by detonating a primitive (but potentially lethal) car bomb. Compared to 9/11 they were amateurish operations but still potentially deadly, with disaster narrowly averted by a combination of luck, intelligence, police work, and the intervention of alert bystanders.

A second deleterious evolution in the fight against terrorism has been the growing attempt to strike the American homeland. More al Qaeda affiliates began urging their followers to hit the United States and its allies, shifting from local or regional agendas to targeting the “far enemy” across the Atlantic. These most notably included affiliates in Pakistan (e.g., Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan or TTP) and Yemen (e.g., Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula or AQAP, led by Anwar al-Awlaki). Whether the attacks succeeded or not seemed almost irrelevant to the media coverage and general reaction they engendered. In May 2010, a CNN public opinion poll indicated that American fear of a terrorist attack had returned to 2002 levels. Fifty-five percent of those questioned said that an act of terrorism on U.S. soil was likely in the next few weeks—a surge of 21 percentage points from August 2009. Each U.S.-based incident (whether it succeeded or not) increased public anxiety, heightened tensions, and reduced the popular tolerance of risk—a huge vulnerability in itself both tactically and strategically, not to mention politically. The more Americans worried about terrorist attacks, the more attractive they became for terrorists to orchestrate.

American counterterrorism policies have undeniably had important results. At the same time, however, they were seldom elements of an integrated

33 The TTP were connected to the Times Square bombing attempt and AQAP to both the murderous rampage by US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan at Fort Hood, Texas and the 2009 Christmas Day ‘underwear bomber’ Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who sought to obliterate a Detroit-bound airliner by detonating explosives hidden in his shorts.
and effective grand strategy; at least a balanced, over-arching strategy has been hard to discern. The relationship between military force and other tools of statecraft (especially diplomacy) has been strongly tilted toward the former, with the predominant U.S. approach being at the operational level, where Americans are most comfortable. The modern American military values operational excellence over strategic thinking, and well-developed civilian expertise on strategy formulation to guide or compensate has not been forthcoming. A tilt toward the use of force may be understandable for a predominant military power; but it has also emerged out of parochial, ahistorical, egoistic American strategic thinking about the purpose of al Qaeda’s terrorism and how best to counter it over the long term.

_U.S. Strategic Thinking in Counterterrorism:_ U.S. strategic thinking in counterterrorism has aligned comfortably with the sophisticated intellectual tradition that developed during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This is not necessarily wrong, but it is an imperfect fit when applied to terrorism. Following the 9/11 attacks the United States government assumed that al Qaeda’s goal was compellence—i.e., the use of threats to influence another actor to stop doing an unwanted behavior or to start doing something a group wants it to do. This thinking derived from long-standing acquaintance with the nuclear weapons strategies of economist Thomas Schelling. And the assumption was correct up to a point. As previously mentioned, bin Laden’s first goal was to remove Western troops from Muslim lands. In his public rhetoric he repeatedly talked about earlier examples of successful compellence, including the U.S. and French withdrawals from Lebanon in 1983, the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1993, and the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. For many terrorist groups, compellence yielded results throughout the twentieth century because it aligned well with decolonization and nationalist movements whose aims could be expressed in terms of territory.

American decision-makers found the logic of compellence comfortably familiar. Given their twentieth century experience with air power doctrine, they discerned in the 9/11 attacks the hallmarks of strategic bombardment, including civilian vulnerability to attack, the difficulty of effective defense, the benefits of sudden attack, the need for retaliation, and, of course, the execution of operations by aircraft. To U.S. government policymakers, terrorism looked like a kind of counter-value targeting by a nonstate actor. This strategic framework also emerged out of the widespread state sponsorship of terrorist groups in the latter twentieth century, when terrorist attacks were regularly.

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35 Compellence is a subset of coercion, which may also involve positive incentives. See Thomas Schelling, _Arms and Influence_ (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); and Lawrence Freedman, _Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

used as proxies for state-on-state violence. Policymakers naturally feared that the 9/11 attacks presaged an escalation in the use of force, that al Qaeda might acquire a nuclear weapon and gain the kind of destructive means that had thus far been reserved to states—a rational and important danger. Unfortunately, the next leap of logic—that the “terrorist nexus” between Saddam Hussein’s regime and al Qaeda would result in Iraq using al Qaeda to carry out a nuclear attack on U.S. soil—was harder to follow. As U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice famously told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer in a September 2002 interview: “What we will not wait for is that particular nexus of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, that is extremism and the technology to come together in a way that is harmful to the United States.”37 In this way, al Qaeda itself essentially took on the strategic behavior and characteristics of a menacing pseudo-state.

A compellence mindset played to al Qaeda’s strengths. The problem was that in responding to what they saw as classic compellence, U.S. policymakers focused only on the first of al Qaeda’s goals, namely removing Western troops. They inadvertently played into the strategies of leverage that were underway to achieve the other two goals (causing U.S-backed Arab regimes to fall and reinstating a Caliphate)—objectives for which the targeting of the United States was a means, not an end. This in turn drove the United States all the more eagerly to an over-reliance on operational answers to a strategic challenge.

American counterterrorism policy over the past decade has had a mixed record. Some U.S. efforts have achieved excellent results, including preventing potentially deadly terrorist attacks. But a decade has passed now, and there is no papering over the conceptual flaws in American strategic thinking: Terrorism sits at the tactical level of warfare, aspiring to strategic effects. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan functioned at the operational level. Yet the future of the United States and its role in the world is determined at the grand strategic level.

In other words, since 9/11 the preferred order of things has been turned on its head: tactics are controlling grand strategy, rather than the other way around. And, instead of confounding tactics, the American government has been trying to meet this challenge on its preferred terrain: at the operational level, where the United States has been dominant since 1990. This approach has been neither a promising way to defeat al Qaeda and its burgeoning affiliates, nor a solid foundation for an enduring and effective American grand strategy.

In short, al Qaeda is losing ground but the United States is not necessarily winning. To succeed over the long term, consolidate its position as a great power and put al Qaeda out of business, American policy must be more wide-ranging, clear-eyed, balanced and dispassionate than it has been

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during the recent past, placing the threat of terrorism within a broader economic, political, and historical grand strategic context.

‘Ends’: Clarifying American Objectives

“Preparation for war or against war, from the grand strategical aspect, is the main problem of peace, just as the accomplishment of peaceful prosperity is the main problem of war. . . .”
Col. J. F. C. Fuller, 1923

“While the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. It should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace—for its security and prosperity.”
B.H. Liddell Hart, 1954

Ten years after 9/11, there is little agreement on what “peace” means or, in other words, how U.S. objectives or “ends” in this struggle should be defined. Instead, the United States government has continuously expanded the concept of what it can and must do, starting with stamping out terrorism itself throughout the world, and gradually evolving into direct action against any group or affiliate that aligns with al Qaeda or its rhetoric.

The goal all along should have been to end al Qaeda, the entity that attacked the United States and caused thousands of casualties on American soil. The United States should have started with a clear vision of that objective in mind, tailoring its counterterrorism campaign to the best way of achieving al Qaeda’s long-term demise. The best way to achieve that is to pursue a counterterrorism strategy that marginalizes and contains the particular leveraging power of a given group, using a well-balanced combination of political, economic and military means.

The United States needs to sharpen its strategic focus. In aligning ends with means, a top priority should have been to practice conservation of enemies. Instead, in the operation in Afghanistan, for example, there was from the outset a conflation of the Taliban with al Qaeda. More and more evidence of this mistake is emerging, most recently in Peter Bergen’s excellent book, The Longest War, which explains why the United States did not pursue al Qaeda’s leadership in December 2001:

[Hank] Crumpton [head of CIA operations in Afghanistan] recalls that [General Tommy] Franks [Commander, US Central command] pushed back because of two issues: The small American “footprint” approach had already worked so well at overthrowing the Taliban, and the time it would take to get more U.S. soldiers on the ground into Tora

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40 For much more on the historical record of what works in ending terrorist campaigns, see my *How Terrorism Ends*. 
Bora. Crumpton countered that taking on the al-Qaeda core hiding out in Tora Bora was not the same as defeating the Taliban: “This was different, this was a high mountain stronghold heavily defended. . . And I maintained that we could not wait for weeks, even many days, because of my concern that al-Qaeda, bin Laden in particular, would escape to Pakistan.” General Franks explained by email his reasoning about why he did not send more U.S. soldiers to take on al-Qaeda’s core: “My decision not to add American troops to the Tora Bora region was influenced, as Hank [Crumpton] reports, by several factors: The comparative light footprint of coalition troops in theater, and the fact that these troops were committed to operations ongoing across Afghanistan. . .” 41

Here is evidence of the failure to distinguish between enemies—in this case, the Taliban and al Qaeda—and a focus on operations straight away after the 9/11 attacks. It was followed by confusion of the threat of al Qaeda with a long-standing obsession with Saddam Hussein and regime change in Iraq.

Subsequently, the United States became bogged down in two counterinsurgency campaigns, conducting operations that had little to do with advancing U.S. core interests. In Afghanistan, for example, formerly disparate forces have aligned against the United States (the Haqqani network, numerous Taliban factions, drug lords, war lords, and so forth), neighboring Pakistan is providing sanctuary and to some degree supporting them, we are saddled with propping up a government in Kabul that lacks legitimacy, and our aims have grown so dramatically since 2001 that it is difficult to see how we will be able to achieve them. At a time when there were more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan, the total number of al Qaeda operatives in the tribal regions of Pakistan was reported to be somewhat “more than 300” 42 and the number in Afghanistan was, according to Leon Panetta, when he was CIA Director “50-100, maybe less.” 43

The imbalance is obvious. As laudable as the motivations behind this counterinsurgency campaign are, the operation in Afghanistan should never have been about protecting civilians and holding territory, but about eliminating the possibility of al Qaeda attacking the United States again. Counterinsurgency, even if seemingly successful for a while, is likely to falter over time because of the difficulty of sustaining popular will in a democracy and America’s ambivalent and weak partners in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. But the bigger point is this: we should never have allowed al Qaeda to drag us into these costly counterinsurgency campaigns in the first place.

Counterinsurgency as a response to al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks has had serious drawbacks. Most important, it is entirely at the tactical and operational

level of warfare: although the United States is treating counterinsurgency as a strategy or a grand strategy, it is not. Counterinsurgency emphasizes U.S. control of territory outside the United States and excites all the natural ethnic, tribal, nationalistic, human instincts in opposition to foreigners on native soil. In doing so, it is a defensive approach that yields the initiative to the enemy. While the goal of protecting the population is a worthy one, counterinsurgency campaigns simultaneously force the United States to defend regimes it may not like and whose interests are at odds with American interests. However hard the U.S. and international community try to support and monitor fair elections, the outcome cannot be relied upon because in the absence of the ability to provide security for its people, no state government is truly legitimate. Counterinsurgency also makes the United States a pseudo-occupying government, playing into undesirable echoes of European colonialism, whether the United States sees it that way or not. (American perspectives are not the point.)

Finally, and most importantly, a counterinsurgency framework bestows legitimacy upon al Qaeda and its affiliates. Insurgency is a time-honored form of warfare, engaged in by legitimate warriors and akin to centuries of struggles for self determination. Terrorism, on the other hand—i.e., the deliberate targeting of civilians by nonstate actors for symbolic political effects—is never legitimate. Historically, the only way campaigns that have involved terrorism can acquire political legitimacy is by disavowing or otherwise separating themselves from the acts of violence. That happens only rarely.44 Al Qaeda’s terrorism is causing a backlash that is killing the group and, while no one wants innocent people to be targeted, the United States is foolish to interfere with that backlash. Those who engage in terrorist attacks are terrorists. For all of these reasons, framing al Qaeda as a “global insurgency” is a mistake, not least because a global insurgency requires a global counterinsurgency—a formula for national bankruptcy, strategic irrelevance, and loss of American primacy.

Counterterrorism is a better response to al Qaeda. Over the long term, effective counterterrorism should seek to exacerbate the weaknesses of the terrorist group, rather than allowing the group to exploit the weaknesses of the state. In this sense, the strategies of the United States and al Qaeda should mirror each other. Al Qaeda’s greatest vulnerability, its leaders have admitted, is its failure to mobilize popular support.45 So the most effective counterterrorism

44 For examples and further explanation, see Chapter three of my How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns (Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 73-93.

45 Ayman al-Zawahiri describes the failure to mobilize as a long-standing al-Qaeda vulnerability, the key to past failed efforts in Egypt and elsewhere. See for example his Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner (Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nab) first published as a serial in the London-based Saudi newspaper The Middle East (Al-Sharq al-Awsat in December 2001). See also Gilles Kepel’s The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) for an analysis of this long-standing weakness.
policy to end al Qaeda is widespread intelligent counter-mobilization, both at home and abroad.

Effective U.S. counter-mobilization can complement the process of ending what is currently underway if it incorporates five major initiatives. First, the United States needs to better articulate what al Qaeda is and what it is not. In particular, the U.S. government should stop using the name to apply to each group (or individual) that claims an association or whose attack al Qaeda claims. In particular, treating affiliates as seamless parts of the central organization is foolish, lionizes the group, and leads to a mismatch of ends, ways and means. It is a bit like arguing that in 1954 the North Vietnamese were Chinese- and Soviet-aligned Communists with no local nationalist goals. Did that kind of muddled strategic analysis serve American interests? Second, the United States and its allies should exploit internal cleavages within the extremist Islamist movement—they are legion, including points of disagreement such as the order of priority in targeting, the position of Shi’ites in the Muslim faith, whether killing Muslim civilians is justified, the suitability of specific rituals of worship, and especially whether to label other Muslims apostate. If Americans can merely stop thinking of every group or individual that spouts “jihadi” rhetoric as being “al Qaeda,” they will take a huge stride forward in intelligently pursuing their interests.

Third, policymakers should hive off local constituents of groups that have only recently begun to espouse an “al Qaeda-associated” global agenda. That may at times require talking to people that Americans do not like, or encouraging local governments to do so. Formulating local solutions to local problems may help return new affiliates to their local agendas—or at least hobble their ability to recruit new members.

Fourth, the United States and its allies should stop lionizing al Qaeda and instead highlight its foolish mistakes. Most important, when al Qaeda-associated attacks kill innocent civilians, the U.S. and its allies should publicize those “targeting errors” just as quickly as our enemies currently post gruesome videos of our mistakes or their successes on You- Tube.

Finally, the United States and its allies should facilitate or work with the backlash—or at least avoid making mistakes that prevent it. Held up to the light, al-Qaeda’s strategy is self-defeating: it is killing the very people on whose behalf it claims to be acting. So, this is not “winning hearts and minds” but facilitating al-Qaeda’s tendency to lose them. The revolt currently underway in the Arab world amply demonstrates the emptiness of al Qaeda’s vision for the future.

The central objective of U.S. counterterrorism should be to return the al-Qaeda threat to the level of tactics, avoiding the dysfunctional action/reaction dynamic of terrorism, hastening the group toward its demise, even as we maintain focus on larger state interests and a balanced longer-term grand strategy that identifies American interests, the threats to those interests, and the means available to be deployed. A well-crafted counterterrorism strategy can only be an integral part of a grand strategy for a great power.
A Grand Strategy for a Great Power: Resilience, Balance and Self-Determination

Beyond concern with al Qaeda, any effective grand strategy should begin with a clear understanding of American long-term interests and objectives—i.e., how to protect and pursue those interests. Al Qaeda continues to be a serious threat, but it must be met with a more balanced, long-term approach that is sustainable, balancing ends, ways and means.

With this in mind, American grand strategy should contain the following five elements (in order of priority): First, protect the homeland against further attack, by al Qaeda or anyone else, and build domestic resilience. The United States government must do a better job of bringing its own costs and risks into greater alignment, particularly by educating the American public about terrorism. As long as “success” is defined as never having another successful terrorist attack, the enemy has the initiative and the U.S. approach is destined to fail. Al Qaeda may yet pull off a spectacular attack and kill Americans on U.S. soil; but in conjunction with taking intelligent measures to prevent that, a crucial element of our grand strategy must be to strengthen American psychological defenses in advance. Protecting the homeland also means surgically attacking those groups who specifically target the United States, while engaging in a broader-based counter-mobilization against al Qaeda.

Second, regain economic prosperity as the foundation of American security. In the past ten years, the United States has done a poor job of keeping means aligned with ends. Strategic objectives have been overshadowed by anxiety and an obsession with operations. History is littered with states that were undermined by their own self-exhaustion in war, a far greater threat to the long-term future of the United States than is al Qaeda. Strategy cannot emerge from operations; it must be the other way around.

Third, U.S. policymakers should strengthen the rules-based world order that the U.S. helped to create, the global environment in which the United States and our allies have thrived. The United States must behave more like a great power, by doggedly pursuing the kinds of cooperative ventures among states that align with our interests and advance global stability. This is not to say that international institutions or agendas should take precedence over American interests; however, lack of strong U.S. leadership means an unstable global system, and everyone loses.


Fourth, the United States should encourage regional powers to tackle regional problems, except when they directly threaten our first two interests—
the U.S. homeland and its economic prosperity. A bit more deft “off-shore balancing” is in order. The most successful great powers throughout history have eventually realized that they cannot be in the middle of every fight.

Finally, whenever possible, the United States should return to the concept of self-determination as the centerpiece of our approach to the world. For decades the United States inspired and supported popular governance; yet in the midst of the so-called Arab Spring, the American image in the Arab world is negative and getting worse.\textsuperscript{48} While it can be tricky amidst a flurry of civil uprisings in the greater Middle East, the United States should still stick to its principles, from which it derives considerable soft power, by identifying with the aspirations of people around the world to rule themselves in diverse ways that capture their own priorities and hopes for the future.

These five points add up to a grand strategy that incorporates sound counterterrorism. It would finally align U.S. ends and means and provide the best strategy for hastening al Qaeda’s demise. Among other attributes, the strategy highlights al Qaeda’s big lie: namely, that it was interested in advancing the genuine aspirations and welfare of young Muslims. In fact, al Qaeda has consistently been more interested in toppling regimes and pursuing its own rigid, brutal Salafist vision. The leaders of al Qaeda were trying in their terrorist campaign to shock and inspire young people in the Arab world, and to effect change. They claimed to be concerned with the future of the entire Muslim umma, including non-Arab Muslims; but that was never really true. For bin Laden and Zawahiri, key personal goals were to remove the leaderships in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and replace them with conservative Taliban-like rule. Now in Egypt, the intellectual epicenter of the Arab world (as well as a birthplace of al Qaeda), there is an unexpected answer unfolding.

For a decade, the United States has struggled to find a counter narrative in the fight against al Qaeda, a way to shore up moderates without tainting them, and it is emerging from within the Arab World. Our role should be to avoid directly interfering, even as we support the emergence of pluralistic forces that could represent a counter-mobilizing force that inspires millions of young Arabs. Of course there are enormous risks, just as there were in the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Now Americans must reverse the widespread impression that the only change they support is change that they effect, and shirk the tendency to be so self-centered as to miss an historical paradigm shift that may be delivering the best answer to al Qaeda imaginable.