

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

Al-Qaeda: Center of Gravity and Decisive Points

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ABSTRACT

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The strategic center of gravity for the war against Al-Qaeda is the extremist ideology practiced by Usama bin Laden and his followers. This strategy research project (SRP) intends to look at the circumstances that empower Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network in their war against the United States. It analyzes the strategic elements of this conflict from a Clauswitzian perspective of a strategic center of gravity with supporting decisive points. It concludes with a recommended course of action for defeating Al-Qaeda, based on the foregoing analysis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	III
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	VII
LIST OF TABLES	IX
AL-QAEDA: CENTER OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS.....	1
PURPOSE.....	1
RELEVANCE OF CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS.....	1
Source Of Leverage.....	2
CAMPAIGNS AND CHARACTERISTICS	2
Terrorists' Derived (or real) Objectives.....	2
Adversary's Concentrated Mass.....	3
Allows or Enhances Freedom of Action	4
Source of Leverage	4
AL-QAEDA: CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS.....	5
ATTACKING AN EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY?.....	6
U.S. Role in Relations Between Palestine and Israel.....	8
U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East.....	8
U.S. Policies toward Iraq.....	9
Information and Education Campaign.....	10
Saudi-U.S. Relations.....	10
Information Campaign.....	11
WAY AHEAD.....	12
DECISIVE POINTS	12
Leadership	12

Terrorist Cells.....	13
Network.....	14
Economic.....	15
State Sponsorship.....	16
CONCLUSION.....	17
ENDNOTES.....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	21

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

FIGURE 2: AL-QAEDA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY AND SUPPORTING DECISIVE POINTS..... 5

LIST OF TABLES

FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADVERSARY'S CENTERS OF GRAVITY.....	2
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AL-QAEDA: CENTER OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS

PURPOSE

The strategic center of gravity for the war against Al-Qaeda is the extremist ideology practiced by Usama bin Laden and his followers. This strategy research project (SRP) intends to look at the circumstances that empower Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda terrorist network in their war against the United States. It analyzes the strategic elements of this conflict from a Clausewitzian perspective of a strategic center of gravity with supporting decisive points. It concludes with a recommended course of action for defeating Al-Qaeda, based on the foregoing analysis.

RELEVANCE OF CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS

The question as to whether the traditional concepts of centers of gravity (COG) or decisive points (DP) apply to operations against terrorism is a reasonable and important one. Despite their awareness of Napoleon's strategy for conquering Spain, Clausewitz and Jomini did not witness the kind of asymmetric conflict recently waged by terrorists. In their day, strategic campaigns were waged against nation-states generally abiding by acceptable practices of war. Understanding the applicability of their concepts is important because the following analysis assumes their current validity in support of a recommendation for the most efficient and effective means of winning the war on terrorism.

Before discussing the relevance of applicability, we should consider a few basic definitions. Since the publication of On War, there have been innumerable interpretations of Clausewitz's original work. Since this analysis focuses on the strategic level, definitions in the recently published Joint Publication 5-00.1 are most appropriate. The very nature of contemporary strategic operations requires a joint perspective. Joint Publication 5-00.1 offers the following definition:

Centers of Gravity are those characteristics, capabilities or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.¹

Joint doctrine advises commanders that it may not be possible or wise to attack an adversary's COG directly, so an indirect approach may be necessary. Joint Publication 5-00.1 advises the indirect approach may offer the most viable method to exploit the adversary's critical vulnerabilities through identification of decisive points. Decisive points are geographical places, specific key events, critical systems, or functions that allow commanders to gain a marked

advantage over an adversary and greatly influence the outcome of an attack. Decisive points are not COGs, but they may be critical to attacking or protecting them.²

Joint Publication 5-00.1 further defines COG by specifying 13 COG characteristics:

Transitory In Nature	Can Physically Endanger One's Own COGs
Closely Linked To The Derived (Or Real) Objective	COGs In Military Operations Other Than War Are Normally More Intangible In Nature
Heavily Dependent On Factors Of Time And Space	Source Of Leverage
Exists At Each Level Of War	Allows Or Enhances Freedom Of Action
Can Shift Over Time	Located Where The Adversary's Mass Is Concentrated Most Densely
At The National-Strategic Level, Many Intangible Elements	In A Major Operation, Can Shift As Its Phase Is Changed
Predominately Physical At The Operational And Tactical Level	

FIGURE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADVERSARY'S CENTERS OF GRAVITY

This SRP shows how these characteristics apply to terrorist activities, demonstrating that terrorist groups do exhibit COGs. Then it offers historical examples of successful anti-terrorist campaigns, demonstrating that attacks on terrorist groups' COGs can be effective.

CAMPAIGNS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Although all thirteen COG characteristics apply in one way or another to terrorist activities, four of them are most applicable. The remaining nine are also applicable, but they are of less significance in anti-terror campaigns. Nonetheless, campaign planners should note their significance-always assessing their vulnerabilities.

Terrorists' Derived (or real) Objectives

First, we should determine the terrorists' derived (or real) objectives, obviously to thwart their efforts. The arson attack committed by Andreas Baader, Gundren Ensslin, and two accomplices in a Berlin department store on 02 April 1968 marked the beginning of a terrorist campaign waged for the next 30 years by the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany. The ideological goal set early by Baader and Ensslin was to topple the post-World War II democratic

order in West Germany. In April of 1992, the RAF published a letter indicating that its armed struggle in Germany and its attempts to counter the revolutions in Eastern Europe in the late '80s and early '90s were a failure.³ The RAF's ideological goal was finally denied with the death of world communism and the rise of democracy in its place.⁴ Other terrorist movements sharing similar ideologies also dissipated across Europe. The capture of RAF leadership in the mid-70s and state sponsorship from East Germany from the mid-70s through the early 90s were merely decisive points targeted by the Federal Republic of Germany to deny these significant advantages to the RAF. Continuing denial of terrorists' real objectives can fatally weaken them, exposing them to repeated frustrations and eventual defeat.

Adversary's Concentrated Mass

Terrorists' COGs are often located at points of physical or ideological mass. The Malayan Emergency, which began in 1948, is often characterized as a military and political campaign fought by the British and Malayan Federation government against the Chinese-led Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The objective of the MCP was to establish communist rule over all of Malaya, which included 500,000 Chinese. The rebels, numbering about 3,000 at their peak, largely came from and derived their logistical and ideological support from the significant Chinese portion of the Malayan population.

The British reasoned that the Malayan Emergency could not be won solely through military operations, so they integrated civic measures into the campaign plan. While conducting military operations targeting the leadership and operation cells, the British moved to isolate the guerrilla leaders from their base of support by physically resettling approximately 530,000 Chinese and sympathizers, separating them from the MCP. The British ideologically separated the guerillas from their base of support by establishing the Malayan Chinese Association, composed mainly of Chinese and English-educated Chinese businessmen with much to lose if the communists prevailed in the conflict.⁵ By enticing the population's business interests to oppose the communists, the British undermined the rebels' ideological support, since capitalism and communism could not coexist.

The MCP were finally defeated in 1960, isolated physically and ideologically from their anti-colonial base of support. The Malayan Communists' center of gravity was the base of ideological and physical support it received from the Chinese population in Malaya.

Allows or Enhances Freedom of Action

Although terrorism is very complex and its origins are as diverse as those who practice it, a common attribute is the extreme means undertaken to achieve objectives. These means are essential to achieving objectives, since other methods (political, legal, economic) are perceived as ineffective or unavailable. This “all-or-nothing” approach offers incredible freedom of action and greatly enhances terrorists’ inherent capabilities. Terrorists usually strike at places and times most convenient to them. Their elusiveness and invisibility grants them this freedom of action. Small groups of individuals with no regard for lawful warfare operate freely to achieve their ends, limited only by their imaginations. They often rationalize their actions by their faith in the importance of their ideological objectives. This is an ultimate example of the ends justifying the means. At the very least, they never seem to doubt the righteousness of their cause, and they remain oblivious to traditional morality or conventional mores.

Source of Leverage

Terrorists operating in democratic states are unwilling or unable to mobilize popular support, and they are sometimes impatient. The majority of Italians did not support the aims of the Red Brigade as it initiated a “strategy of tension” in 1969.⁶ However, like other organizations throughout Europe during the same period, relatively small organizations were able to achieve much publicity and attention for their causes in very short order with little expenditure of resources.

Terrorists almost always wage asymmetrical warfare, since they do not possess the strength to attack their adversaries with like force. Asymmetrical warfare epitomizes skillful use of leverage to gain an advantage. Leverage allows the weaker to use tools and techniques to indirectly attack an adversary’s weaknesses where least expected in order to compensate for the lack of strength. As seen during the Al-Qaeda strike on 11 September 2001, box cutters and introductory pilot training were used to hijack four aircraft and attack important Western economic and psychological points of their adversary. Al-Qaeda did not possess the strength to attack the U.S. military directly, but was able to leverage terror to execute a successful attack with far less expenditure of resources, and with horrific effects.

Even so, the history of defeated terrorist campaigns demonstrates that terrorist organizations have COGs. Targeted effectively, loss of their COGs marks the end of their operations. To defeat terrorists, we must identify their COGs, distinguish them from DPs, and understand the importance of the connectivity between the two. The doctrine of Clausewitz and Jomini may not have envisioned a terrorist adversary, but it surely offers a COG-oriented

strategy to defeat terrorists. Defeating critical nodes in the terrorist's operations yields the same consequences that these theorists predicted. The critical and challenging task is to identify and attack those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which terrorist organizations derive their freedom of action, physical strength, and will to fight.

AL-QAEDA: CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND DECISIVE POINTS

We have noted some successful anti-terrorist campaigns, showing how terrorists' COGs were attacked but past terrorist campaigns are not foremost on most people's minds. Does Al-Qaeda have similar vulnerabilities? Can we identify and attack Al-Qaeda's COG? These critical questions can be answered affirmatively. Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization with a extremist ideology as its strategic center of gravity. Five decisive points support the Al-Qaeda COG: leadership, financial support, state sponsorship, network, and terrorist cells. The figure below depicts the relationship of these decisive points with its center of gravity by using the analogy of a Greek Parthenon structure.⁷ Decisive points must be directly connected to the COG. All five of Al-Qaeda's strategic decisive points are directly linked to its extremist ideology, which provides Al-Qaeda with the ultimate source of its power and facilitates its freedom of action.

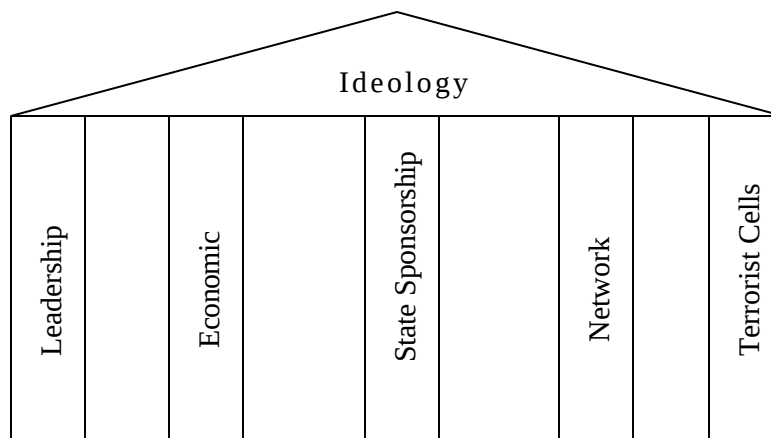


FIGURE 2: AL-QAEDA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY AND SUPPORTING DECISIVE POINTS

ATTACKING AN EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY?

Al-Qaeda is executing an information operation campaign against the U.S. in a receptive environment with almost no competing message to counter their effort. Using the tools of the pop culture it rejects, Al-Qaeda effectively uses videos, World Wide Web, and other modern instruments to garner support from the large disaffected Islamic population throughout the world. Separating and isolating Al-Qaeda extremists from their popular base of support should be the target of any campaign designed to defeat Al-Qaeda. In order to effectively defeat Al-Qaeda, we must isolate its ideology from that of the rest of the Muslim faith. Assuredly attacking a extremist ideology is difficult, but a successful counter-attack must begin by offering a competing and credible ideology that is perceived as better than Al-Qaeda's.

It is difficult to offer a credible and better ideology when the target environment has been so totally alienated from Western culture. Al-Qaeda is successfully recruiting support in areas of the world where people are living the life described by Thomas Hobbes 350 years ago—a solitary, nasty, poor, brutish, and short life. Al-Qaeda enjoys both active and passive support from many who do not share its extremist beliefs. Al-Qaeda's frequently stated objective is to “unite all Muslims and establish a government which follows the rule of Caliphs.”⁸ All Muslim governments corrupted by Western influence must be overthrown by force. Usama bin Laden believes that eventually Muslim state boundaries will be erased and replaced with a unified government under the rule of the Caliphs.⁹ The majority of the world's Islamic population does not share this extremist view. To better understand this seam for potential exploitation, we must understand the origins of Wahhabism and its ties with Al-Qaeda.

There are many interpretations of Islam with many different theologies and laws. Among the most extreme conservative views is Wahhabi Islam, named after its founder Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). This form of Islam gained initial legitimacy in the region between Mecca and Medina when its founder became disillusioned with the moral decline of the Islamic faithful and preached a resurgence of the traditional lifestyle common during the time of the first Prophet Muhammad. This religious movement took on political strength when Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab joined Muhammad Ibn Saud, a local tribal chief, to form a combined movement to unite the tribes of Arabia, converting them to this puritanical version of Islam.¹⁰ This eventually led to the creation of a Saudi State in central Arabia. Presently, most Arabs in this region are Sunni Muslims, sharing a tradition of toleration. They have reconciled the contradiction between this extremist interpretation with a modern view of Islam.¹¹ Usama bin Laden's objective of erasing all state boundaries and uniting all Muslims under the rule of the

Caliphs has its origins in the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Al-Qaeda gained acceptance in Afghanistan because the ruling Taliban Government had a similar extremist view of the faith. Al-Qaeda's fundamentalist beliefs are extreme. However, its anti-western, especially the anti-American, message is well received throughout most of the Muslim community. Al-Qaeda has been able to garner resources and political support from a significant portion of the Islamic population, although they do not share its same extremist views.

Al-Qaeda is able to generate support from the Muslim community at large for a variety of reasons. First of all, the adage that the "enemy of my enemies is my friend" rings true. This strategy has limits but is an effective way of garnering support. Unifying most Muslims is the hatred for American support to modern Israel with its Zionist history. Jewish fundamentalism is rooted in the Zionist movement, which flourished during the pre-state era in Palestine. Zionists wanted their religion to dominate every aspect of life throughout the Jewish region, as ordained in the Bible. From the Arab perspective, the war of 1948 was motivated by Zionists in order to annex the Gaza Strip, the holy city of Jerusalem, the West Bank and Golan Heights from Arab and Hashemite control.¹² Arabs in particular, and Muslims in general, have not forgotten this bloody struggle, still widely viewed as an unlawful occupation of Arab territory. Nor can they forget past and current U.S. support of the state of Israel.

Secondly, the self-interests of various groups within Arab and Muslim societies are served by anti-Americanism as a cover to distract public attention from other, far more serious problems within their societies. Although most Arab and Muslim governments do not rely on Al-Qaeda to foster this anti-Americanism, Al-Qaeda is able to feed off it in order to garner broad support from this disenchanted population.

Muslim anti-Americanism prevails because it is a useful tool for radical rulers, revolutionary movements, and even moderate regimes to build domestic support and pursue regional goals with no significant costs. Instead of responding to demands for democracy, human rights, higher standards of living, less corruption and incompetence in their own governments, rulers easily blame America for their own societies' failings and their own inept leadership.¹³ Al-Qaeda feeds off this shared hatred and thus has gained support throughout the Islamic community.

The core of this anti-Americanism was generated in Saudi Arabia, Usama bin Laden's homeland. "The Saudis' policies made the world safer for Saudi Arabia and the Saudi regime," said Martin Indyk, an assistant secretary of state for Middle East policy during the Clinton administration, who has become a prominent critic of the Saudi strategy. "I don't think it was their intention to make it unsafe for the United States. But that was the actual, if unintended,

consequence of buying off the opposition, and exporting both the troublemakers and their ideology.”¹⁴

If it is possible for Al-Qaeda to generate this intense support from the majority of the population with more moderate religious beliefs, it must be possible to offer a competing ideology that is more credible and rational—and that satisfies the self-interest of the same population targeted by Al-Qaeda. The key is to leverage issues that vitally concern the majority of Muslims, thereby separating Al-Qaeda extremism from the rest of the Islamic faithful. U.S. policies for the region are the cause of widespread concern, especially for Arab Muslims. The role of the U.S. in the Palestine-Israel conflict is an overriding issue. Other issues shaping opinion among the majority of Muslims are U.S. military presence in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, and U.S. policies toward Iraq.

U.S. Role in Relations Between Palestine and Israel

Arguably, in no other area of our foreign policy do Muslims view such a significant disconnect between U.S. foreign policy and American values than in its relations with Israel. Nothing could do more to change the perspective of the Muslim community than a fundamental change in U.S. policy for Israel. At the heart of Muslim discontent is a belief that the U.S. approach to the problem is one-sided, unfair, and partial to Israel. During President Bush's 12 September 2002 speech to the UN, in which he condemned Iraq for violating 16 UN resolutions, Muslim newspapers around the world questioned such logic: They quickly cited Israel's violation of 31 UN resolutions in its ongoing conflict with Palestine. Even this does not acknowledge the more than 40 occasions when the US used its veto to block additional resolutions on Israel.¹⁵ The United States should approach the conflict in much more of an even-handed manner; the long-term consequences of U.S. partisan support for Israel are not worth the short-term gains. Even if peace is not possible, the U.S. should be perceived as leading a fair process toward a just solution. At a minimum, the U.S. should attempt to make the Mitchell Accords work and revitalize the agreements achieved at Camp David. Although peace is not guaranteed, there will be no hope for a solution without some positive U.S. initiatives. To ignore widespread regional animosity toward U.S. policy in the region is to ignore a strategic reality. Al-Qaeda is successfully attacking the U.S. COG in the Middle East, when the U.S. should be attacking Al-Qaeda's anti-American COG.

U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

Many of Al-Qaeda's supporters have developed a deep resentment with the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia during and after the Gulf War. More than a decade after the war, a

sizeable U.S. force remains in the country. From a Muslim perspective, the American military presence defiles the home of Islam's holiest shrines, most notably Mecca and Medina. Usama bin Laden has provoked his followers to take arms against the Americans and allies until all U.S. Armed Forces are removed from Saudi Arabia:

...On that basis, and in compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order for their armies to move out of the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.¹⁶

There is no more of an effective way to undermine the argument than to remove it from the table. What is the real purpose of our military presence in Saudi Arabia? What country directly threatens the territory or rule of its government? United States military presence is not worth the potential harm it creates for the well being of the American people. The rationale for U.S. presence was to contain Iraq; now this strategic presence serves as a potential staging base for future offensive action. United States policies toward Iraq are another source of conflict, empowering Al-Qaeda to generate broad support.

U.S. Policies toward Iraq

Immediately following the Gulf War, the UN imposed sanctions against Iraq to ensure compliance of the 1991 agreement at the end of the war. Almost since its inception, the Iraqi government has been able to deflect the issue of responsibility for the ensuing suffering of their people onto the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, the United Nations. Child malnutrition rates exceeded 36 percent in 1996 and have only recently declined due to a renegotiation of the original sanctions against Iraq. Statements from the UN only strengthen Saddam Hussein's argument of responsibility. The Director of UNICEF Operations declared, "It is undeniable that the oil-for-food program has had a positive impact on the well-being of children in Iraq."¹⁷ Supporters of Al-Qaeda view the sanctions and aggressive policies of the US against Iraq as aggression toward Muslims in general.

Until Iraq's neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, publicly express concern for their safety, the U.S. insistence on a regime change only fuels the argument Usama bin Laden continues to foment against the United States. As the U.S. invades Iraq to force compliance of UN Resolution 1441 and conduct a regime change, it must move quickly to counter the tremendous backlash of Muslim public disdain for the action. Al-Qaeda will continue to feed off the significant increase in anti-Americanism that will surely follow because of offensive actions in Iraq. The apparent benefits of a regime change on the Muslim faithful within Iraq and

Afghanistan must be realized quickly to the rest of the Muslim community in order to counter any benefits to Al-Qaeda. A possible impediment to democratic reform within Iraq is Saudi Arabia. The U.S. must work closely with the Saudi Government and compel their support for the regime change and establishment of a representative democracy. This will not come easily given the current form of government in Saudi Arabia but it is essential to countering potential resurgence in public support to Al-Qaeda. Democratic reform is already underway in some of the neighboring states such as Qatar and Oman, with the popular support of their Muslim constituents. However, until Saudi Arabia embraces reform in its own Kingdom, Al-Qaeda will likely find continual ideological support in the region emanating from the resistance.

Information and Education Campaign

Changing U.S. policies in the Middle East will go a long way toward weakening the ideology espoused by Al-Qaeda, but it must also be accompanied by an effective information and education campaign that targets Al-Qaeda terrorism. The United Nations must take the lead in vilifying the use of terrorism as a viable political activity. The Arab Nations must lead the effort to denounce terrorism in order to isolate Al-Qaeda from its followers.

An information campaign cannot stand by itself; it must be correlated with an effective education campaign for any real hope of success. The Saudi Government currently funds and directs the curriculum for *madrasas*, or religious schools, around the world. For the majority of world's Islamic poor, this is their only means of education. Only the Koran is taught; it serves mostly to keep the Muslim faithful ignorant of independent thinking. Additionally, some of the curriculum is anti-western and anti-Judeo/Christian. Al-Qaeda has been able to effectively recruit from these *madrasas* around the world for its legions of followers. The Saudi government can lead an attack on the ideology of Al-Qaeda by implementing changes in the curriculum, which should vilify Al-Qaeda and the use of terrorism, showing how they betray the teachings of Mohammad. Additionally, these changes must include education that embraces diversity and highlights the commonality of the best of American and western values with the Koran. Until the Saudi Government takes lead on this issue, the U.S. is only pushing on a rope.

Saudi-U.S. Relations

If the Saudi leadership is unwilling to take the lead in denouncing terrorism and subsidizing anti-Western feelings among the Islamic faithful, then the U.S. should reconsider its relationship with the current regime. In a recent compelling commentary, Victor Davis Hanson argues that recent discoveries of oil in Russia and elsewhere around the globe have tilted the balance of oil wealth away from Saudi Arabia. Although the U.S. dependency on Saudi Arabian

oil 20 years ago was a critical component of U.S. interests in the region, this is changing. Oil should not dictate current U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Marshall Wyllie, a former Charge at the embassy in Saudi Arabia, once summed up the American policy best: “We need their oil, and they need our protection.” Discovery of oil reserves elsewhere around the world is changing this paradigm. U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia should change with it.¹⁹

Hanson and many others assert that all the old reasons that bind the U.S. so blindly to Saudi Arabia are no longer compelling. Saudi oil policy is neither pro-Western nor so influential in world oil pricing. The present Saudi government has been an active supporter of terrorism and anti-Western policies around the globe.²⁰ It is not an overstatement to analogize that Saudi Arabia is to extremism and anti-Westernism as the former Soviet Union was to communism. The Saudi government must lead the way in changing the anti-Western sentiment throughout the world’s Islamic faithful. If it will not do so willingly, U.S. and western pressure must compel them to do so. Readdressing U.S. policy on Saudi Arabia could yield other benefits as well. Much of the imbalanced U.S. approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves to offset the anti-Israeli policies currently emanating from the Saudi government. Reduced Saudi animosity toward Israel will enable the U.S. to proportionally reduce its diplomatic support of Israel.

Saudi change will take time—time that only favors Al-Qaeda. The U.S. must hasten the process of changing the Muslim’s opinion of Western society by focusing and coordinating an information campaign to compete with the current Saudi ideology and diplomacy.

Information Campaign

Recently, the Secretary of Defense created the Office of Strategic Information in order to influence world opinion by offering a focused and regionally oriented information campaign concerning U.S. policy, values, and beliefs. The initiative died a quick death, largely from within the federal government, because it was not properly coordinated and supported before its birth. Many interagency members, some within DoD, opposed it even before learning what it was about.

There may be a benefit to its premature death, however. Now more than ever, we need such an effort. If it is resurrected above the DoD level, it will likely have results that are far more promising than the original initiative. Without such an effort, we will have no overarching information campaign to counter the daily drone of anti-U.S. sentiment around the globe. Every U.S. adversary actively conducts a well-coordinated and highly developed information operations campaign, which is simply unopposed by the U.S.

Although a democratic society that strongly advocates freedom of speech is not well suited for such an internal, organized and focused information campaign, any significant effort in this direction is much better than none at all. At its core, the campaign must at least address the following pillars: U.S. policy in the Middle East; factual information exposing the Iraqi Regime's threat to the region; factual exposure of the activities by Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations; and advocacy of common values shared by Muslims and U.S. citizens.

WAY AHEAD

Al-Qaeda's extremist ideology can be attacked and defeated by parsing its critical components and addressing each in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Following 11 September 2001, U.S. policy in the Middle East should have increased consideration of the Muslim perspective and its possible implications in garnering support for extremism. Where possible, U.S. policies throughout the Middle East must undermine the ideology of extremism while addressing the immediate problems. An information and education campaign, sanctioned by the UN and led by the Saudi Government, offers a fundamental solution. This campaign should begin immediately; time is not on our side. The percentage of the Islamic faithful is growing rapidly, surpassing the number of Christians in the world. By 2025, 30 percent of the world's people will practice the Islamic religion.²¹

DECISIVE POINTS

Attacking its ideology will not, in and of itself, defeat Al-Qaeda in a complete and comprehensive manner while protecting U.S. interests. Such an attack must be coupled with a simultaneous attack on those factors that provide Al-Qaeda with a significant advantage in its Jihad against the United States and its Allies. Although Al-Qaeda's leadership, financial support, state sponsorship, terrorist network and cells are not its primary source of power and do not provide for complete freedom of action, they are directly linked to Al-Qaeda's extremist ideology. Additionally, they provide a significant advantage to Al-Qaeda.

Leadership

History affirms that removing leadership has often meant the end of a particular terrorist operation. However, without further action, the terrorist campaign is often reincarnated in some other form. Targeting leadership is relatively easy, attacking deeper causes is difficult. It is difficult for terrorist organizations to survive the loss of the leaders because they are typically so thin in their vertical structure. Their thin leadership structure and compartmentalization enable

them to defy intelligence organizations that are attempting to penetrate their operations and organizations. However, strength of their shared ideology allows them to overcome losses in leadership. The stronger the common commitment, the more likely the organization will survive losses in leadership. Because Al-Qaeda shares with many other terrorist organizations a deep hatred for the US, Israel, and Western influence in the Middle East, defeating the leadership may only win the battle. However, in the case of extremist Muslims, it will not win the war.

Terrorist Cells

Al-Qaeda is relatively small but distributed across many countries, with ties to other terrorist organizations. Al-Qaeda's command and control structure includes a *majlis al shura* (or consultation council). This council approves major policies and actions, including terrorist operations and the issuing of *fatwahs*. The group has a "military committee" that approves military matters.²² It also has a business committee that oversees the Al-Qaeda front business and financial matters; a *fatwah* or religious committee that deliberates religious rulings; a media committee that disseminates information; and a travel office.²³ An estimated 5,000 militants have been trained in a dozen camps operated by Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.²⁴ These members are organized into cells that carry out the missions directed by the leadership.

Attacking these cells is essential to achieving U.S. objectives and protecting interests, but will not in and of itself totally defeat Al-Qaeda. Without defeating the ideology that attracts recruits, more cells will only replace those that are lost. Current U.S. and coalition operations around the world are dedicating considerable effort to defeating individual cells. The U.S. operational COG in Afghanistan is the recently established viable representative government. To protect this COG, the U.S. will continue to conduct military and interagency operations in Afghanistan directed against Al-Qaeda, thwarting its ability to organize and act against this government. Attacking these cells and the organizational hierarchy that directs their activities is essential to protecting U.S. and coalition interests.

Even so, Al-Qaeda and supporting terrorist organizations continue to target U.S. and coalition personnel and critical assets. Countering this immediate threat is essential to winning the entire war, providing confidence in the U.S. government that it is acting appropriately to protect vital interests. More importantly, success strengthens the coalition and weakens Al-Qaeda's ability to exploit seams in the tenuous framework holding this coalition together. Failure to defeat the immediate objectives of Al-Qaeda, especially when they are targeted against a small portion of the coalition, may serve to strengthen Al-Qaeda's cause and weaken

the resolve of the coalition over an extended period. In the final analysis, neutralizing Al-Qaeda operations in the region may be as sufficient as their total destruction.

Network

The word network evokes the image of an organizational chart that depicts an ability to communicate among all components. However, the significant advantage of a terrorist network is much more than its organizational structure and ability to communicate. An effective network enables an organization to remain dispersed. It is therefore difficult to detect and defeat, although sometimes giving the illusion of a massed effect at a specific place and point in time. Terrorism is also a network of trust, which provides the significant advantage the entire organization's blind assurance that all components are always working toward one goal, even though organizational elements (cells) are widely dispersed geographically and not connected in any physical or electronic way. The means of communication and organizational structure are thus practically invisible, yet incredibly functional. Understanding the difference between the human network of trust and the means by which terrorists operate is key to better exploitation. Faith leaves no footprint.

Members of Al-Qaeda pledge an oath of allegiance called *bayat*. Al-Qaeda kills those suspected of collaborating with the enemy and regular internal investigations help purge the organization of suspected betrayers. Additionally, in order to protect the organization from penetration, it is deliberately flat and wide, so critical information is compartmentalized. Very few people within the organization know the master plan, its complex of components, and its timeline.

Al-Qaeda is a distributed network, yet it has repeatedly massed effects at a point and time of its choosing while remaining dispersed. This is especially true since intelligence operations swiftly routed the central Al-Qaeda staff and its supporting Taliban regime when they were massed in Afghanistan. Since being stripped of their sanctuary in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda operatives have moved their operations into remote areas around the world to plan their own attacks. These operatives have joined a loosely knit alliance of like-minded but independent groups.²⁵

How do you attack a network of trust? Traditional targeting means will not work, as conventional munitions are most effective against a massed enemy. Trust networks are unique: They connect people emotionally and create a metaphysical solidarity. To break them up, we must get a greater understanding of the network itself. Theorists have recently offered worthwhile insights into how organizations function. They have identified a general set of

principles and a suite of nodes that facilitate the functions of a network. Critical nodes include “hubs,” “gatekeepers,” and “pulsetakers.” The people who are directly connected to most of the other people in the organization are hubs. Those connected to the critical people, most often the influential individuals immediately surrounding the leadership are gatekeepers. Finally, those indirectly connected to a significant number of people who know the right people in an organization are institutional pulse-takers.²⁶

Counter-terrorist intelligence should use these concepts to locate the critical components of Al-Qaeda's trust network and then identify the critical members who most affect the organization's effectiveness. Moreover, although human penetration is virtually impossible, injecting friction in their operation at key points may generate distrust and degrade operational performance. Additionally, removing key individuals from this trust network may effectively degrade operations and promote instability by causing a rapid turnover of personnel. Although not necessarily the case with Al-Qaeda, some terrorist organizations have been so tightly organized that removal of the leader and a few key nodes led to their immediate defeat, as occurred with Shining Path.²⁷ Understanding the trust network of Al-Qaeda will enable the U.S. to direct its limited resources to the critical components of the organization in order to degrade their operations.

Economic

Even though terrorism is remarkably cost effective and requires very little resourcing compared to other major military campaigns, it does require some funds to transport and house its operatives, to execute missions, and to maintain the cells. Additionally, WMD material is relatively expensive. The first bombing of the World Trade Center was limited by funding. During his trial, Atta professed that he would have ensured the collapse of the Trade Towers in 1993 by building a more lethal, potent weapon if he had additional funding.

The primary source Al-Qaeda's funding is Usama bin Laden. He has financed operations from his personal fortune, estimated at one time to be between \$270 to \$300 million. Most of this fortune was earned through the family construction company and other holdings in Saudi Arabia. Other than his personal wealth, Al-Qaeda continues to receive support throughout the world. In 1999, the Saudi Arabian government uncovered a group of Islamic clergy who had been funneling an estimated \$50 million donated as alms to bin Laden.²⁸ Additionally, it is also believed that Al-Qaeda has received funds through the Dubai Islamic Bank in Dubai, which is controlled by the United Arab Emirates.²⁹ The United States has tracked funds from several companies and charitable organizations that are suspected of raising and laundering funds for

Al-Qaeda, such as the Mercy International Relief Agency.³⁰ This is likely only the tip of the iceberg.

In order to defeat the funding stream resourcing terrorist operations around the world, the U.S. must continue to lead a campaign to identify and freeze all assets in support of known terrorist organizations. This tracking must continue as funding sources move underground, especially in many Pacific Rim states that often exchange currency without the aid of banks.

Another challenge is to dry up the broad financial support funneled from the Islamic population at large to terrorist organizations. Many donate not knowing where their money is going. Recent accounts of a Saudi princess' alleged benevolent donations ending up in the hands of terrorists involved in the 11 September 2001 attacks exemplifies this problem, which has cultural dimensions. The Koran teaches the importance of charity, especially anonymous charity. So any policy which demands identification of individual donations and amounts violates this culture. Even so, discovery of large sums of money being transferred through financial institutions and drying up this broad support can best be accomplished by identifying the recipient organizations as supporters of terrorism. Again, the Saudi government must take the lead in this discovery campaign, since any Western initiative will be viewed with suspicion by the Islamic world.

State Sponsorship

Arguably, the most effective method for eliminating terrorist organizations is to remove state sponsorship, which provides basing rights, freedom of movement, training sites, and a host of other privileges that enhance terrorist capabilities. Usama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda operatives fled the Sudan and found state sponsorship with the Taliban in Afghanistan. They were forced to leave Sudan by the Sudanese government only after considerable coercive diplomatic force was applied to the Sudanese government. After their removal from Afghanistan by military force, many believe the leadership has fled to western Pakistan, controlled by anti-Musharif forces.

The U.S. cannot take the same approach to clearing Al-Qaeda from Pakistan as it did in Sudan and Afghanistan. The consequences of applying too much force there may undo tenuous Pakistani support of the war on terrorism. Working quietly with the Musharif government, the U.S. must enhance Pakistani capabilities to counter this common threat without having the military and law enforcement footprint currently evident in Afghanistan. To do otherwise would likely topple the current regime, which would then be replaced by parties far less favorable to U.S. interests. A moderate and cooperative Pakistani regime is particularly

important given that Pakistan and India are nuclear states. The same approach is true is for Indonesia and other states whose balance of government teeters between anti-terrorism and anti-Westernism. Despite such fragilities, world pressure directed through the UN must be applied to any state that harbors terrorist organizations.

CONCLUSION

Using a traditional strategy, we can defeat terrorist by comprehensively attacking their center of gravity and supporting decisive points. However, as this analysis consistently reveals, we must assume an unconventional perspective in executing the strategy. Whereas the strategic center of gravity in Kosovo was obviously the Milosevic regime, we cannot so easily identify and target the more amorphous and omnipresent terrorist COG. The valid center of gravity in most terrorism cases, and especially with Al-Qaeda, is the ideology that provides their true source of power and freedom of action. Attacking ideology is difficult, much more difficult than targeting the location of leaders and their likely replacements. It takes time and almost always requires other elements of power than the traditional military to successfully combat terrorism. The essential element to attacking Al-Qaeda's extremist ideology is to isolate it from the support it receives from a significant portion of the Muslim community.

Likewise, actions against terrorism must be comprehensive, applying sufficient pressure not only to defeat the ideology but also to remove its leadership, cut off its state sponsorship, eliminate its financial support, break up its networks of trust, and annihilate or neutralize its cells. Only such a comprehensive approach will strengthen friendly resolve and mobilize sufficient forces to defeat Al-Qaeda. Time is on the side of Al-Qaeda, not on those waging war to destroy their nefarious terrorist organization.

WORD COUNT = 6,700

ENDNOTES

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²⁶ Joel Garreau, "Disconnect the Dots," The Washington Post, 16 September 2001, p.1.

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