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Strategic Counter-Terrorism: Getting Ahead of Terrorism Part I: Understanding the Threat

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The Context:

In the spectrum of combating terrorism, there are three sub-disciplines:

- First, **anti-terrorism**, the protection of vital infrastructure and personnel;
- Second, **operational counter-terrorism**, the targeting of terrorists and disrupting their operations; and,
- Third, **strategic counter-terrorism**, changing the environment breeding extremists and terrorists.

Is it possible to build a strategic counter-terrorist environment? Is it possible to build a milieu that is hostile to terrorists and unfriendly to terrorist supporters? The U.S.-led strategy has focused on catching or killing terrorists and disrupting terrorist plans and preparations. While operational counter-terrorism has prevented over 100 terrorist attacks on Western soil since 9/11, it provides no permanent solution. Thus far, U.S. military, law enforcement, and intelligence strategy has been reactive rather than proactive.

To address the current gaps in counter-terrorism policy, can a successful strategy to get ahead of terrorism be developed? Can government partnerships with the community and the private sector prevent the production of extremists and—their virulent by-products—the terrorists? After delineating the post-9/11 threat landscape, this paper will argue that the terrorist threat has grown appreciably during the past five years. After discussing the organizational, operational, and ideological nature of the adversary, the series of Jebesen Center occasional papers to follow will propose seven strands of strategic counter-terrorism.

Background:

Before the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government focused its security efforts on developing a continental shield to protect its territory from conventional missile attacks. However, after al Qaeda attacked iconic American landmarks on 9/11, terrorism was identified as the nation's tier-one national security threat. In the next decade, the overriding threat posed by the violent manifestations of political Islam is likely to persist. As a religiously- and politically- driven movement, the threat will endure and grow beyond the current generation.

Today, the Global Jihad Movement has replaced the singular threat posed by al Qaeda. The key constituents of the Global Jihad Movement are (1) traditional al Qaeda (responsible for the attacks on 9/11, the USS Cole, and the U.S. embassies in East Africa), (2) operationally associated groups, and (3) ideologically inspired homegrown cells.

The principal motivation and justification of the Global Jihad Movement is an ideology that America is the "enemy of God." Politicized and radicalized Muslims believe that the U.S., its

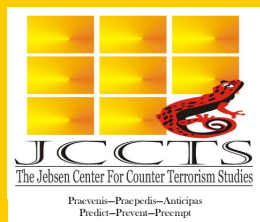
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allies, and its friends are deliberately killing Muslims and willfully attacking Islam. The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, a conflict that is likely to last more than a decade, is nurturing and driving this growing belief. This belief is also reinforced by propaganda and publicity stemming from multiple conflicts worldwide—Palestine, Lebanon, Kashmir, Chechnya, Mindanao, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Both terrorist and extremist groups seeking to harm the U.S., its allies, and its friends are ably exploiting the humiliation, anger, suffering, and resentment of the Muslims in these lands of jihad and beyond, who have been exposed to Osama bin Laden’s message that “it is the religious duty of every good Muslim to wage Jihad,” or holy war. By providing a Koranic justification and a historical precedent to support suffering fellow Muslims, bin Laden and other extremist leaders drive terrorist recruits to violence and solidify their determination to support violence.

Characterizing the Threat:

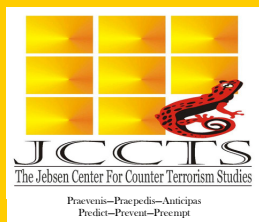
As terrorist groups adapt in the face of threat, so too did the traditional al Qaeda evolve, changing its shape, size, and structure during the past five years. In place of one single group—al Qaeda—the threat to the West in the foreseeable future will be from the Global Jihad Movement, which has grown as a result of al Qaeda’s adaptations to its new environment. As the Global Jihadists perceive America as its principal enemy, the threat will be primarily to the U.S. and to its interests overseas.

However, while Western governments, including that of the U.S., continue to focus on al Qaeda, the threat has moved beyond this small group led by Osama bin Laden. Collectively, the threat of the Global Jihad Movement comes not just from traditional al Qaeda, but also from its operationally-linked associated groups and its ideologically inspired homegrown cells.

First, the traditional al Qaeda organization (often identified as Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda) presents a continued threat to the West. The U.S.-led coalition military action in Afghanistan and the arrest of operatives in 102 countries worldwide have severely weakened the operational capabilities of al Qaeda. But, although the numerical strength of al Qaeda has been depleted from 3,000 to 4,000 members in October 2001 to an estimated 400 to 500 at present, the surviving leadership of the group continues to inspire and instigate new attacks against the U.S.

Second, al Qaeda’s associated groups present a growing threat to the West. North America, home to migrant and diaspora-hosting countries, is vulnerable to penetration by multiple local jihad groups that have developed an external presence. These groups include Tanzim Qaidat fi-Bilad al-Rifdayn (al Qaeda in Iraq), Jamiat Ansar al Sunnah, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), Islamic Group of Egypt (IG), Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC), Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), Libyan Islamic Fighters Group (LIFG), Laskar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jayash-e-Mohomed (JeM), and other groups from Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Caucuses. After receiving training, weapons, financial, and ideological support al Qaeda, these local jihad groups have begun to emulate the thinking and operational signature of al Qaeda. Ideologues and operatives from these groups have historically found safe haven in the lands of jihad and refuge among ethnic and religious enclaves of the West.

Third, a threat exists from homegrown groups inspired by al Qaeda and its associates. The “alumni” of the anti-Soviet, multinational Afghan mujahideen campaign have since established an ideological, financial, and recruiting base in the U.S.—particularly in New York and New Jersey—and in Canada. By penetrating the diverse and massive migrant and diaspora communities throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many were successful in politicizing and radicalizing segments of Muslims. During the buildup to 9/11, Islamist communities were increasingly influenced and driven by Osama bin Laden’s message that it is “the religious duty of every Muslim to wage jihad.” In the post-9/11 environment, especially in the post-Iraq environment, the Internet-aided Islamist milieu continues to inspire homegrown jihadists and mujahids. The number of true believers in violence and those willing to carry out violence is rising incrementally.



Very few of these like-minded individuals have traveled to Afghanistan, but some have journeyed to training camps in Pakistan and other conflict zones. Most have received limited physical but extensive ideological training in North America, Europe, or Australasia. A small number of American converts have joined these diaspora and migrant Muslims. The Islam that informs jihadist and mujahid ideology is usually a corrupted version of the Koran and religious texts—a “cut-and-paste” version of Islam in which passages are selectively retrieved to drive and justify hostility to non-Muslims, as well as to Muslims not aligned with the preferred ideology.

After the training camps in Afghanistan were dismantled, the threat presented by these groups has dispersed to other Muslim-majority lands. If the West does not develop a comprehensive response that counters the threat posed by the Global Jihad Movement, the threat of extremism and terrorism will ascend.

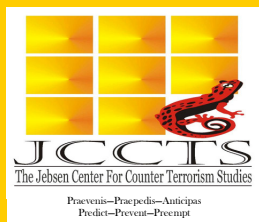
Evolution of the Threat:

The most noteworthy aspect of al Qaeda in the post-9/11 environment has been its broadened appeal within the Muslim community. Its ideology of Global Jihad and operational methodology of martyrdom (suicide bombing) have become popular, widespread, and accepted by like-minded groups from North America to the Middle East and Asia. After inventing itself as a popular movement, the al Qaeda-inspired conglomerate of groups has maintained its course despite sustained pressure by the U.S., its European allies, and friends in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Its intransigence and failure to yield have surprised many. Its followers, both cradle and convert Muslims, have become even more committed to the idea of jihad. Both Muslim terrorists and extremists have become more resolute in achieving its strategic goals.

In the face of adversity, the Global Jihad Movement has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to generate a post-9/11 vision of perpetual war against the West. Despite the killing and capture of several thousand mujahids and jihadists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Algeria, Yemen, Morocco, Egypt, and Chechnya, the threat has not diminished. By their nature, most terrorist groups are resilient. They are able to replenish their human losses and material wastage and continue the fight. In the case of jihadist and mujahid groups, their operational range is global in scope. The arrest of over 500 such terrorists in the West (including Canada, the U.S., the UK, continental Europe, and Australia) demonstrate the adaptive nature of the constantly evolving network. The movement no longer needs to send operatives from conflict zones; there are now young, first- and second-generation, politicized, and radicalized Muslims living in the West who are willing to carry out its avowed mission. Even if al Qaeda leadership is hunted down and the group destroyed, its mission of attacking the West as a religious duty, articulated by bin Laden and popularized by al Qaeda’s actions, will continue.

The terrorist environment has appreciably changed since 9/11. As opposed to clearly-defined terrorist groups and their support bases, most twenty-first century governments are confronting amorphous terrorist networks. The formation of partnerships—loose cooperative networks and alliances between terrorist groups have increased the terrorist staying and ideological power. Three and a half years before President Bush formed a global coalition in October 2001, Osama bin Laden formed an alliance of groups in February 1998. The World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders (al-Jabha al-Islamiyya lil-Jihad Dudda al-Yahood wal-Saliibiyeen) is a platform of groups driven by a common ideology. As opposed to the well-defined hierarchical groups of the past, the future threat will come from networked, flat structures.

The expanding ideological and operational linkages between local, regional, and global networks are forcing governments to develop a better understanding of who is talking to whom and who is working with whom. To reduce the threat of political violence, governments should closely monitor and counter both the rapid development and transfer of terrorist capabilities across regions, conflicts, and groups. Instead of only monitoring and



reporting, even the security and intelligence services will be compelled to craft an operational agenda. Faced with the growing linkages between domestic and foreign terrorist groups, governments have no option but to aggressively target and erode the ideological, personnel, and physical infrastructures of threat groups and their resilient networks.

To be successful, governments should move from traditional cooperation to collaboration. The global best practices in combating terrorism in this collaborative way will include the creation of common databases, exchange of personnel, joint training, joint operations, transfer of expertise and resources, and sharing of experience. Only a network of government and other agencies can effectively target a network of terrorist entities. Unless governments worldwide realize that terrorism is a common threat that requires a collaborative response, the world will fail to stem the global rise in terrorism.

U.S. Response to the Threat:

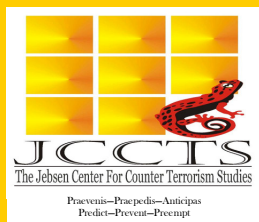
The U.S. military is 20 years ahead of the European militaries in terms of technological advancement. This strength has meant that the U.S.-led international response to terrorism has been predominantly military—and, as a result, predominantly kinetic and lethal. The dominant combating terrorism strategy demonstrated by the U.S. has relied on an investment in operational counter-terrorism, which involves three elements: catch, kill, and disrupt. The “decapitation” model articulated by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has led to the capture and/or death of high-level terrorist leaders planning and preparing operations against Western and other targets. Nonetheless, the Rumsfeld doctrine advocating the application of overwhelming military power, though well-intentioned, has not diminished the long-term strategic threat and will not end terrorism.

A military response was also necessary after 9/11 because the criminal justice and prisons system was incapable of both dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan and processing the detainees. From 1993 to 2001, this inadequate system was able to prosecute only 70 terrorists. Although military counter-terrorism has an important role, the limitations of using kinetic and lethal measures to fight terrorism are increasingly apparent. Likewise, intelligence-led catch and kill operations have produced only tactical gains. The strategic landscape, whether in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iraq, remains virtually untouched.

The successes and failures against the senior leadership of traditional al Qaeda are testimony to the effectiveness and limitations of the current strategy. Five years after 9/11, the emir-general and deputy emir-general of al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, are still alive. They are directing both the core group and the wider movement from the organization’s apex. Their virulent ideology advocating violence has spread worldwide, fusing a conglomerate of groups, networks, and cells. This worldwide movement consists of about thirty groups operationally associated with al Qaeda in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, networks in the West, and numerous ideologically affiliated cells. United by a common belief that the West is attacking Islam and Muslims, they seek to punish the U.S., its allies, and its friends.

With the death of bin Laden and al Zawahiri, al Qaeda itself would be likely to die, but its ideology of global jihad will sustain the spirit of the indoctrinated true believer. Despite a relentless hunt, these iconic leaders of jihad have survived. They have fought back with intermittent attacks or attempts against the West. In the face of defeat, they have maintained alliances and built new friendships with jihadist groups worldwide. Patiently and steadfastly, they have built a movement that will outlast them. Through his writings and propaganda, al Zawahiri, the principal strategist of the Global Jihad Movement, has created a vision and a mission for a campaign that will extend beyond his generation.

Sustained collaboration between the United States intelligence community and its non-NATO ally Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence and the Intelligence Bureau has led to the capture of multiple al Qaeda operational chiefs. Although its operational leadership has suffered severely, the group has been able to generate new leaders. A U.S. unmanned aerial



vehicle (UAV) strike killed Abu Hafs (alias Mohomed Atef), al Qaeda's military commander in Kandahar, in November 2001. Atef's successor, 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, was captured in March 2003, and his deputy, Tawfiq bin Attash (alias Khallad) was captured in April 2003. Their later successors, Abu Faraj al Libi and Hamzah al Rabbiyah al Masri, were captured in May 2005 and killed in a UAV attack in December 2005, respectively. Although the U.S. believed that Khalid Habib al Masri (alias Khaled al Harbi) perished in a UAV attack in January 2006, it is very likely that he survived and both he and possibly Abdul Hadi al Iraqi are the current operational leaders of al Qaeda.

Thus, despite a sustained hunt against al Qaeda leadership, the group has maintained a succession of competent leaders as operational commanders. As the July 2005 attacks in London and the August 2006 attempt to blow up U.S.-bound trans-Atlantic flights have demonstrated, the threat from al Qaeda is recurrent.

Rethinking a Response to the Threat:

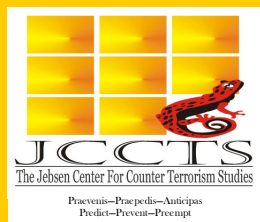
To develop a strategic response to fight terrorism, it is necessary to understand terrorism as a phenomenon. Although knowledge is vital, knowledge is nothing without understanding. Most importantly, what leads to terrorism? Terrorism is a tactic (a method or a means) employed by individuals and groups driven by extreme leftist or rightist, nationalistic, and/or political-religious ideologies. As nature of terrorist groups underwent profound change with globalization, the strategies developed in the Cold War were rendered inadequate and insufficient to deal with contemporary terrorism. Compared to the Cold War terrorist groups of the 1970s and 1980s, the post-Cold War groups engage state and society using both military and non-military instruments and strategies. Contemporary terrorist groups are multi-dimensional organizations that require multi-pronged responses. In addition to confronting government and society with the traditional militant tactics of guerrilla warfare (attacks against combatants), terrorism (attacks against non-combatants), sabotage (infrastructure attacks), kidnapping, hijackings, and hostage-taking, contemporary terrorists challenge us economically, politically, diplomatically, socially, and ideologically.

Terrorism today is a societal, economic, and political phenomenon; as such, the conditions in each of these dimensions leading to terrorism must be understood and then corrected. The manifestations of prolonged socio-economic and political conflict breed extremism. Extremism shapes intentions. Persistence of intentions leads to a buildup of operational capabilities. The terrorist threat, then, is a product of three factors. (1) intention, or motive; (2) capability, or material resources and human expertise; and (3) opportunity to attack, or target vulnerability.

Despite several billion dollars invested by the international community since 9/11, the threat of extremism and terrorism has increased. Have we understood the nature of the problem? Have we misdiagnosed the problem? Have we developed the right tools to fight the rising tide of extremism that is producing the terrorists? Are we trying to bomb an ideology that is producing men and women willing to kill and to die? Has our inappropriate response—overreaction or under-reaction—actually worsened the threat? Have we built the right capabilities to counter and manage the threat to our societies?

As long as extremism prevails, terrorism will persist. Governments, particularly Western governments, are not inclined or properly equipped to fight extremism. Western governments must understand that there is no quick fix to terrorism. Fighting terrorism is like fighting bad breath: bad breath is caused by a certain condition in the mouth, and until that condition is corrected, bad breath will persist. Bad breath cannot be fought with bad breath. Like fire cannot be fought with fire, terrorism cannot be defeated with guerrilla military tactics. The international community must develop an appropriate formula to defeat terrorism at its core.

To reduce the terrorist threat, both governments and civil society must think and develop more preventive and comprehensive responses. Future courses of action should prevent



extremists from progressing into full-fledged terrorists, and prevent people from progressing into extremists by exposure to ideology. Future strategy should enlist broad-based community and private sector participation.

As the application of full spectrum response is difficult, most governments, including that of the U.S., invest largely in developing the tools and the techniques of operational counter-terrorism. By investing in this targeting of cells that plan and implement terrorist attacks, it is possible to prevent terrorist attacks and to reduce the immediate threat through high quality-high grade intelligence-led operations to kill or capture terrorists. Prevention of terrorist attacks is critical, but the real challenge is to defeat terrorist organizations by neutralizing support for both terrorist tactics and the extremist ideology that often motivates them. No terrorist group will survive without a lifeline meaning material support and ideological sympathy. As long as support and belief is intact, there will be a long line to succeed Zarkawi, bin Laden, al Zawahiri, and many others. In parallel to the operational counter-terrorism agenda, a robust strategic counter-terrorism agenda to change the environment is now needed.

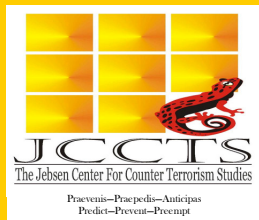
What is Strategic Counter-Terrorism?

In the Muslim world, Islamism and jihadism are moving from the periphery to the center. This dangerous development, a post-9/11 phenomenon, has been catalyzed by the events in conflict zones, predominantly in Afghanistan and Iraq. Issues such as the detainee abuses at Abu Ghraib, the offensive Danish cartoons, and Israeli attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon have had a profound impact on both the Arab and Muslim world. Traditionally, the most threatening extremist groups emerged from Arab countries; however, Arabs compose only twenty percent of the world's Muslim population. Increasingly, political Islam is spreading from the Arab world to the non-Arab Muslim world. As a result, Asians, Africans, and even Muslims in the West are being politicized and radicalized. With globalization, the ideology of jihad is permeating borders and societies around the world. In the New York prisons, the conversion rate both of African-Americans and Caucasians to a political Islam is on the rise. The future threat to the West is both from within and outside.

As the threat is significant and growing, a full-spectrum response to terrorism and extremism is critically needed to manage the current and future manifestations of threat. The constituent components of a full-spectrum response are: first, anti-terrorism; second, operational counter-terrorism; and third, strategic counter-terrorism. When the physical threat is significant, governments must invest in target hardening protecting vulnerable targets and personnel. When the threat grows, governments must invest in operational counter-terrorism targeting terrorist cells planning and preparing attacks.

As opposed to reactive anti-terrorism and operational counter-terrorism, strategic counter-terrorism is proactive. While anti-terrorism is hard, operational counter-terrorism is harder, and strategic counter-terrorism is the hardest. Strategic counter-terrorism requires careful thinking and planning, long-term investment in education and training, forging alliances and partnerships, and an extremely strong will to remain and persist. While operational counter-terrorism is surgical, strategic counter-terrorism seeks to change the environment. By making the permissive environment hostile to terrorists, terrorists will surrender, desert, and abandon the fight. By making the permissive environment unfriendly to the terrorist support base, the pool of supporters and sympathizers will diminish and their commitment to the cause will decline.

To move in this direction, governments must seek to engage the very community that spawns extremism and sustains terrorism. No government can defeat the contemporary wave of terrorism without enlisting the active cooperation of the community and the private sector. In strategic counter-terrorism, the community is the center of gravity. As terrorism destroys individuals, property, and dreams, a visionary government leader can successfully instill a sense of responsibility in society and strike a broad-based partnership with the private sector. Without public-private partnership, no government can win against



terrorism. Law enforcement, intelligence services, and militaries can help to contain and control terrorism, but ultimately it is the communities that defeat terrorism. When the community realizes that it is counter-productive to sympathize and support the personalities, groups, and ideas behind extremism, violence declines. To bring the community to that point, it is necessary to invest in a range of projects that makes terrorism costly and extremism unattractive.

The seven strands of strategic counter-terrorism are: first, ideological response, second, educational response, third, financial response, fourth, media response, fifth, legislative response, sixth, informatics, and seventh, developmental response. In a series of articles, beginning with this introductory article, The Jebson Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies consider these seven strands in strategic counter-terrorism to reduce the current and emerging threat. These non-kinetic and non-lethal projects are for consideration of the U.S. and its partner nations united in the global fight against terrorism and extremism.

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The Jebson Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies was established at The Fletcher School, Tufts University in September 2005. Its mission is to increase the understanding and competency of counter-terrorism professionals at the local, national, and international levels. Core research topics develop proactive counterterrorism alternatives to future terrorist threats through three main areas of focus: prediction, prevention, and preemption.

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