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For the record Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Russell Howard, founding director of the Jebson Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies at Tufts University



If you want to keep a failing state from becoming a terrorist playground, Howard says, forget the government and help the people.

Preemptive strike

How to fight extremism without firing a shot

INTERVIEW. Of all of the interrogatives Russell Howard asks about global terrorism — who, what, when, where, why and how — none assumes more importance than “what if?”

For Howard, the retired brigadier general who serves as founding director of the Jebson Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies at Tufts University's Fletcher School, it's the question that could stand between the world and another terrorist organization such as al-Qaida.

Though he's approached the terror question before as founding director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Howard says he's begun to focus not on the root causes of previous terrorist organizations and attacks, but the elements that could promote a new wave of violent extremism around the world. Howard acknowledges that his approach, as with any prediction, isn't a failsafe. However, given the increasingly unstable nature of global politics and terror, it's better to get it right some of the time than not at all.

What elements of terrorism are you focused on now, and how has your focus shifted years after the Sept. 11 attacks and the Madrid, London and Bali bombings?

We're looking at different areas. We're looking at failed and failing states. Not that poverty is a root cause of the present form of terrorism — it's an independent variable, not the dependent variable — however, failed and failing states are areas of easy recruitment for al-Qaida and al-Qaida-like entities. I'm concerned about Bangladesh, Chad, the Central African Republic, Tanzania, Sierra Leone and those areas of the world where we think al-Qaida can operate reasonably freely and could provide rich recruiting grounds — not that such things are occurring there.

For some time, there was concern about possible al-Qaida operations in Somalia. Did the Somalia scenario spur you to focus on failing states?

Yeah. When a failed state comes to mind, Somalia is the failed state, and it's fairly clear that al-Qaida or similar groups were operating there. It's arguable now what the current situation is there, but al-Qaida probably is not going to operate out of Somalia the way it did out of Afghanistan. As poor as Afghanistan was when al-Qaida was working with the Taliban there, Somalia is exponentially poorer. There's not much infrastructure there, and it would be hard to establish the kind of training bases they had in Afghanistan, but Somalia is the type of country where al-Qaida could operate fairly easily.

With a lack of sympathetic governments to work with, does al-Qaida prefer a vacuum of government?

I don't know of any government, particularly in Sunni Muslim states, that would let al-Qaida set up and operate at their behest. Of course, in Pakistan, we're fairly certain that al-Qaida is operating in Waziristan, and the federated territories, but, arguably, the Pakistan central government doesn't have control over those areas. I am sure that [President Gen. Pervez] Musharraf would prefer not to have al-Qaida operate in his country, but he has been so far unable to do anything about it.

What warning signs do you look for in failing states?

I think you'd look at failing states and areas where there isn't central government control, where al-Qaida can assist in some of the functions that a state would normally provide. For example education, unemployment, welfare — those areas where they can replicate a state or state activity when the state doesn't have jurisdiction or a military footprint and

isn't taking care of the needs of the people.

When you're putting together a plan to deal with such problems, do you recommend heading off a failed-state scenario at the pass by bolstering that government, or do you deal with failed states that already exist?

I think you've asked a great question. If I had my way, then we'd identify states where this could happen and, I like your term, head it off at the pass. Unfortunately, the solution may not be in bolstering the state — it could just be in providing microfinance to villagers and areas at risk. The concern is that, when you try to bolster a state, the funding that you give the state ends up in Mercedes-Benzes and weapons. Our take here is that you identify where it could happen and provide educational, financial and welfare alternatives and, usually, it's most successful when it's economic development.

Jason Notte