

# THE WAR ON TERROR

## *A Fifth Year Status Report*

BY DAVID SCHANZER, DIRECTOR, TRIANGLE CENTER ON TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY, DUKE UNIVERSITY

It was just over four years ago, on October 7, 2001, that U.S. and British forces began an aerial bombing campaign in Afghanistan, thus beginning what President Bush has coined the “Global War on Terror.” As we enter the fifth year of this conflict, it is a good time to take stock of where we stand—looking at what progress we have made, what setbacks we’ve endured, and what challenges we face in the future.

Our conflict with al-Qaeda, specifically, and radical Islamic fundamentalism, more generally, has three core components. First, we have to attack the terrorist organizations and cells around the world and deny them safe harbor and sanctuary to organize, plan, and train. Second, we must build up our defenses to prevent the terrorist from executing attacks. Third, to diminish the power and effectiveness of terrorist groups over the long term, we have to engage in and win the battle of ideas in the Muslim world.

Our efforts to attack the terrorists have been, for the most part, successful. Unlike September 12, 2001, when we awoke uncertain about the future, today we do not live in daily fear of frequent, devastating terrorist attacks. And the terrorist attacks that have succeeded in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, have been, relative to 9/11, small scale, low technology attacks. This is because al-Qaeda has been significantly weakened through the combination of the military campaign in Afghanistan, an intensive global law enforcement and intelligence effort, and an equally potent global crack down on terrorist financing (to which the banking industry is contributing every day through its data gathering and reporting under the Patriot Act).

Nonetheless, al-Qaeda is an adaptable and patient organization. It may well have multiple, spectacular attacks being planned right now. Moreover, the weakening of al-Qaeda has devolved power to smaller, more localized, jihadist groups. These groups may not currently have the capacity to send operatives to the United States to execute attacks – but they may one day. So, the threat is still potent and we will need to stay on the offensive for many years to come.

The second component of the war on terror is our effort to better secure the homeland against terrorist attacks by strengthening our defenses. When examin-

ing this aspect of the war, the starting point has to be that we have not had a terrorist attack inside the United States for four years. We are indeed safer than we were four years ago: it is much harder for citizens of high risk countries to obtain a visa to enter the United States; we now have a terrorist watch list that can be accessed by federal and local officials; aviation security has been significantly improved; and our intelligence and law enforcement agencies are more closely integrated for the purpose of gathering information on terrorists and terrorist plots.

Nonetheless, serious problems with the response to Hurricane Katrina, and the government’s admitted lack of preparedness for a possible avian flu pandemic are deeply troubling and cast severe doubt over the state of our homeland security. While we are safer today than we once were, the problem is that we are not as safe as we need to be in light of the threats that we face.

Securing a country as physically big and as economically vibrant as ours against all possible types of terrorist attacks is both impossible and undesirable. Our national priorities need to be focused on the two most catastrophic threats: a terrorist attack with a nuclear weapon and bioterrorism. Regrettably, we have not made as much progress over the past four years on these threats as we should have.

Our efforts to secure nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union have lagged, we do not have a robust capability to detect nuclear materials at our borders, and the process for identifying high risk cargo for careful inspection remains rudimentary at best. If our response to Hurricane Katrina, which we knew was coming for 48 hours, is any indicator, we are woefully unprepared to respond to a nuclear attack, which will come with no warning and cause mass chaos and confusion.

Some progress has been made protecting against a bioterrorism attack, but not enough. The capabilities we need to deal with bioterrorism are very similar to those we need for natural infectious disease outbreaks, yet the Secretary of Health and Human Services conceded last month that we are unprepared for dealing with the avian flu. To prepare this country for infectious disease outbreaks, whether natural or terrorist-

induced, we need a vigorous, national program that deploys all the power of our biotechnology industry, our university researchers, and our federal, state, and local public health agencies to meet this tremendous challenge. We do not have that today and time is ticking away.

The third prong of the war on terror is what has been termed “the battle of ideas”—the ideological struggle between al-Qaeda’s view of the world and that of the United States and its allies. Al-Qaeda wants to establish a theocracy stretching from Algeria to Indonesia based on an orthodox reading of Islamic law and has convinced his followers that they have a religious duty to pursue this mission through violence. To ultimately succeed in the conflict with Islamic radicalism, we will have to convince the Muslim world to reject this vision in favor of a brighter future based on religious freedom and tolerance, equality of citizens, and economic progress.

It is in this aspect of the war, however, that we are doing particularly badly. Opinion polls in Muslim countries suggest that the message being heard around the world is that the United States does not respect Islam, that we desire to occupy Muslim lands, that we provide one-sided support to Israel and do not care about the fate of the Palestinian people, that our culture is vulgar, and that we want to dominate the Muslim world militarily and economically. Against this backdrop, bin Laden’s vision of confrontation of the United States resonates deeply.

To turn this around, it will require concrete actions on the ground that demonstrate American values of freedom, generosity, tolerance, and economic advancement. For example, opinion polls have showed that our assistance to tsunami victims has had a strong positive benefit to our image in the Muslim world. The President’s efforts to promote democratic reform are also being well received. But to make a genuine dent in the hostility toward us, we will need a large scale program focusing not on handouts, but rather on support for high quality education for Muslim youth, assistance for building small businesses and promoting entrepreneurship, economic growth through trade, and programs to build civic institutions, like a free press, that can help democratic reforms to take root and prosper.

It is in this area that the Iraq War has taken its greatest toll. Despite the President’s humanitarian rhetoric, the action was perceived in the Muslim world as heavy handed, insensitive imperialism. The prisoner abuse scandal and other scenes from a grisly war have

totally dominated our positive message of liberation and democratization.

Regardless of one’s views on the merits of the invasion, we now must accept the reality that we have an exceptional terrorism problem on our hands in Iraq. If we withdraw, parts of Iraq will become a new pre-9/11 Afghanistan—a sanctuary for terrorists to organize and train with impunity. The longer we stay, however, the more closely linked the new Iraqi government becomes with an unpopular occupying force and the more we continue to provide targets and motivation for the jihadist elements of the insurgency that are tearing the country apart.

The terrorism problem that the invasion has unleashed, ironically, is not one that the United States is going to be able to fix. It is going to be up to the Iraqis themselves to defeat the insurgency, establish a functioning, democratic form of government, and unite the country—the United States cannot impose this result.

Seen in this light, the Iraq War is a metaphor for the entire War on Terror. While we can use our military might, the power of our diplomacy, and our economic influence to reduce the threat, we are not going to be able to solve the complex social circumstances that have led to the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism and the terrorism that flows from it. This is a battle not between the West and the fundamentalists. It is a battle between the fundamentalists and the rest of Islam. It is the Muslim political, religious, and economic leaders who are going to have to decide whether to align themselves with modernity or the past, whether to take responsibility for their future or embrace an ideology of victimhood, whether to take the difficult steps to confront the cancer in their society now or be overwhelmed by it later.

This is the true battlefield of the War on Terror. America can and will do whatever we can to help our side win. But we are not the main combatants. We are just very interested spectators, with a deep interest in the outcome. ☞



David Schanzer is director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, sponsored by Duke and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. This article is based on a presentation at the North Carolina Bankers Association Management Team Conference in Asheville, NC, on October 24, 2005.