

Why America is losing to al-Qaida

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The intelligence community's report in July that al-Qaida has "regenerated key elements of its homeland attack capability" confirms that our six-year effort to undermine the radical Islamist movement that fuels al-Qaida and its affiliated organizations is in tatters.

The report notes that planned attacks have been thwarted and we've become a harder target to hit, but this is akin to treating the symptoms without curing the disease. We are winning battles but losing the larger war.

How has this happened? The conventional wisdom - that we diverted our efforts from al-Qaida's stronghold in Afghanistan to the war in Iraq - tells only the tactical part of the story. The more fundamental problem is that our policy of killing and arresting as many al-Qaida personnel as possible is an incomplete strategy.

Al-Qaida is not simply an outlaw organization that can be put "on the run." Rather, it is part of a broad, religion-based social movement that has deep support in elements of the Muslim world. If al-Qaida can be isolated and deprived of public support, it will wither and die. If not, it will continue to be a resilient franchise capable of regeneration, growth and ultimately additional strikes inside the United States.

From the very beginning, President Bush has misunderstood the genesis of al-Qaida's animus toward the United States. In his Sept. 20, 2001, address to Congress, he declared, "They hate what they see right here in this chamber - a democratically elected government. ...

They hate our freedoms." Well, not exactly. Osama bin Laden is certainly no fan of liberal constitutional democracy, but that dislike did not fuel his call for jihad against America and its allies. It is our policies that bin Laden detests, policies that, in his view, have contributed to the rapid decline of a once-expansive Muslim empire, the taking of Muslim territory and the imposition of oppressive, sacrilegious rulers in Muslim nation-states.

The Bush administration has also failed to recognize that although the vast majority of Muslims reject bin Laden's violent tactics, they support his stance against Western domination in the Middle East, his desire for heightened Islamic identity and his demand for greater respect for Islam and Muslim people. To isolate al-Qaida, therefore, it is necessary to craft a nuanced message that support for al-Qaida will undermine these popular goals and resistance to al-Qaida will help to advance them.

Our actions since 9/11 have not projected this message; in fact, just the opposite has occurred. We launched a war on terror that was widely interpreted as a war on Islam. We invaded and occupied two Muslim nations, not as part of a globally sanctioned multilateral force to combat terrorism but on our own, for a variety of purposes.

We consistently referred to fundamentalist Islamist ideology as "evil." We disengaged from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and projected indifference to the plight of the Palestinian people.

Yes, we removed a tyrannical and hated dictator from Iraq, but we permitted security there to

collapse, leading to death, carnage and displacement. We issued lofty rhetoric about promoting freedom around the globe but gave unconditional support to military rulers and dictators in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere to crush domestic opposition. We tortured and humiliated Muslim men in Abu Ghraib and have held hundreds of Muslims in Guantanamo for years without charges.

With this record, how can it possibly come as a surprise that, in the words of the intelligence community, "we live in a heightened threat environment"?

Improving the situation will require regime change here at home followed by deft, skillful action from whoever inherits the shambles left behind. Violent, radicalized movements are on the rise in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Gaza, Lebanon, Somalia, Algeria and other hot spots.

The next president will need to maintain the aggressive counterterrorism operations that have been established under the Bush administration, but totally recraft the way in which we engage with the Muslim world.

The challenge will be to advance our security goals while projecting a vision for the future that is both sensitive to Muslim aspirations and able to undercut popular support for al-Qaida and its extremist affiliates. That will require a much different approach from the one we have taken these past six years.

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