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HOW TERRORIST GROUPS END

Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida

SETH G. JONES • MARTIN C. LIBICKI



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Summary

All terrorist groups eventually end. But how do they end? Answers to this question have enormous implications for counterterrorism efforts. The evidence since 1968 indicates that most groups have ended because (1) they joined the political process or (2) local police and intelligence agencies arrested or killed key members. Military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups, and few groups within this time frame achieved victory. This has significant implications for dealing with al Qaeda and suggests fundamentally rethinking post–September 11 U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

The ending of most terrorist groups requires a range of policy instruments, such as careful police and intelligence work, military force, political negotiations, and economic sanctions. Yet policymakers need to understand where to prioritize their efforts with limited resources and attention. Following an examination of 648 terrorist groups that existed between 1968 and 2006, we found that a transition to the political process is the most common way in which terrorist groups ended (43 percent). The possibility of a political solution is inversely linked to the breadth of terrorist goals. Most terrorist groups that end because of politics seek narrow policy goals. The narrower the goals of a terrorist organization, the more likely it can achieve them without violent action—and the more likely the government and terrorist group may be able to reach a negotiated settlement.

Against terrorist groups that cannot or will not make a transition to nonviolence, policing is likely to be the most effective strategy (40 percent). Police and intelligence services have better training and

information to penetrate and disrupt terrorist organizations than do such institutions as the military. They are the primary arm of the government focused on internal security matters. Local police and intelligence agencies usually have a permanent presence in cities, towns, and villages; a better understanding of the threat environment in these areas; and better human intelligence.

Other reasons are less common. For example, in 10 percent of the cases, terrorist groups ended because their goals were achieved, and military force led to the end of terrorist groups in 7 percent of the cases. Militaries tended to be most effective when used against terrorist groups engaged in an insurgency in which the groups were large, well armed, and well organized. Insurgent groups have been among the most capable and lethal terrorist groups, and military force has usually been a necessary component in such cases. Against most terrorist groups, however, military force is usually too blunt an instrument. Military tools have increased in precision and lethality, especially with the growing use of precision standoff weapons and imagery to monitor terrorist movement. But even precision weapons have been of limited use against terrorist groups. The use of substantial U.S. military power against terrorist groups also runs a significant risk of turning the local population against the government by killing civilians.

Our quantitative analysis looked at groups that have ended since 1968 or are still active. It yielded several other interesting findings:

- Religious terrorist groups take longer to eliminate than other groups. Approximately 62 percent of all terrorist groups have ended since 1968, but only 32 percent of religious terrorist groups have ended.
- Religious groups rarely achieve their objectives. No religious group that has ended achieved victory since 1968.
- Size is a significant determinant of a group's fate. Big groups of more than 10,000 members have been victorious more than 25 percent of the time, while victory is rare when groups are smaller than 1,000 members.
- There is no statistical correlation between the duration of a terrorist group and ideological motivation, economic conditions,

regime type, or the breadth of terrorist goals. But there appears to be some correlation between the size of a terrorist group and duration: Larger groups tend to last longer than smaller groups.

- When a terrorist group becomes involved in an insurgency, it does not end easily. Nearly 50 percent of the time, groups ended by negotiating a settlement with the government; 25 percent of the time, they achieved victory; and 19 percent of the time, military forces defeated them.
- Terrorist groups from upper-income countries are much more likely to be left-wing or nationalist and much less likely to be motivated by religion.

Implications for al Qa'ida

What does this mean for counterterrorism efforts against al Qa'ida? After September 11, 2001, the U.S. strategy against al Qa'ida centered on the use of military force. Indeed, U.S. policymakers and key national-security documents referred to operations against al Qa'ida as *the war on terrorism*. Other instruments were also used, such as cutting off terrorist financing, providing foreign assistance, engaging in diplomacy, and sharing information with foreign governments. But military force was the primary instrument.

The evidence by 2008 suggested that the U.S. strategy was not successful in undermining al Qa'ida's capabilities. Our assessment concludes that al Qa'ida remained a strong and competent organization. Its goals were the same: uniting Muslims to fight the United States and its allies (the far enemy) and overthrowing western-friendly regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate. Al Qa'ida has been involved in more terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001, than it was during its prior history. These attacks spanned Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Al Qa'ida's modus operandi also evolved and included a repertoire of more-sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and a growing use of suicide attacks. Its organizational structure evolved, making it a more dangerous enemy. This included a bottom-up approach (encouraging independent action

from low-level operatives) and a top-down one (issuing strategy and operations from a central hub in Pakistan).¹

Ending the “War” on Terror

Al Qa'ida's resurgence should trigger a fundamental rethinking of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Based on our analysis of how terrorist groups end, a political solution is not possible. Since al Qa'ida's goal remains the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate, there is little reason to expect that a negotiated settlement with governments in the Middle East is possible. A more effective approach would be adopting a two-front strategy.

First, policing and intelligence should be the backbone of U.S. efforts. In Europe, North America, North Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, al Qa'ida consists of a network of individuals who need to be tracked and arrested. This would require careful work abroad from such organizations as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as their cooperation with foreign police and intelligence agencies. Second, military force, though not necessarily U.S. soldiers, may be a necessary instrument when al Qa'ida is involved in an insurgency. Local military forces frequently have more legitimacy to operate than the United States has, and they have a better understanding of the operating environment, even if they need to develop the capacity to deal with insurgent groups over the long run. This means a light U.S. military footprint or none at all. The U.S. military can play a critical role in building indigenous capacity but should generally resist being drawn into combat operations in Muslim societies, since its presence is likely to increase terrorist recruitment.

A key part of this strategy should include ending the notion of a war on terrorism and replacing it with such concepts as *counterterrorism*, which most governments with significant terrorist threats use. The Brit-

¹ Bruce Hoffman, “Challenges for the U.S. Special Operations Command Posed by the Global Terrorist Threat: Al Qaeda on the Run or on the March?” written testimony submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats, and Capabilities, February 14, 2007, p. 3.

ish government, among others, has already taken this step and abjured the phrase *war on terror*. The phrase raises public expectations—both in the United States and elsewhere—that there is a battlefield solution to the problem of terrorism. It also encourages others abroad to respond by conducting a jihad (or holy war) against the United States and elevates them to the status of holy warriors. Terrorists should be perceived and described as criminals, not holy warriors. Our analysis suggests that there is no battlefield solution to terrorism. Military force usually has the opposite effect from what is intended: It is often overused, alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature, and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment. This strategy should also include rebalancing U.S. resources and attention on police and intelligence work. It also means increasing budgets at the CIA, U.S. Department of Justice, and U.S. Department of State and scaling back the U.S. Department of Defense's focus and resources on counterterrorism. U.S. special operations forces will remain critical, as will U.S. military operations to counter terrorist groups involved in insurgencies.

There is reason to be hopeful. Our analysis concludes that al Qa'ida's probability of success in actually overthrowing any government is close to zero. Out of all the religious groups that ended since 1968, none ended by achieving victory. Al Qa'ida has virtually unachievable objectives in trying to overthrow multiple regimes in the Middle East. To make matters worse, virtually all governments across Europe, North America, South America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa consider al Qa'ida an enemy. As al Qa'ida expert Peter Bergen has noted, "Making a world of enemies is never a winning strategy."²

² Peter Bergen, "Al Qaeda Status," written testimony submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, April 9, 2008.