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Simple Models to Explore Deterrence and More General Influence in the War with al-Qaeda

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Deterrence of terrorism is best approached as part of a broader effort to influence elements of the terrorist system. Although efforts to deter or otherwise influence will only sometimes succeed, to forgo attempting influence because of uncertainty would be to squander the possibility of extremely valuable effects (e.g., averting a terrorist mass-casualty attack). That is, deterrence and other influence efforts are desirable because of their upside potential rather than the certainty or expectation of good results. This paper selectively reviews prior work on such matters and then goes on to argue that a useful way to find influence stratagems with high upside potential is to construct plausible alternative models of adversary decisionmaking and behavior—models that also allow for variability. A stratagem found worthless if assessed with a best estimate of adversary behavior might instead look attractive when viewed with plausible alternative models. This is significant because best estimates are often wrong when made about people in different cultures and settings being viewed emotionally from afar. Further, the mind-sets and behaviors of terrorists—like those of people more generally—vary with circumstances and recent history. Thus, opening our minds to possibilities can be valuable and alternative models can help. To protect against wishful thinking and other problems, of course, a proposed stratagem must also be assessed by its cost and potential side effects.