After September 11, 2001, the United States declared a “war on terrorism.” The initial phases of this war—such as Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom—involves conventional combat operations against regimes that supported terrorist groups. Increasingly, however, U.S. military forces will need to fight al Qaeda and other groups in countries that do not support terrorism but are too weak militarily or politically to counter such groups on their own. Examples include the Philippines and Yemen. U.S. operations in these countries will look less like traditional warfare and more like what has been called “nation assistance,” “foreign internal defense,” and counterinsurgency.

RAND Project AIR FORCE studied effective counterinsurgency operations to derive concepts for likely U.S. strategy against terrorist groups abroad. The central lessons are as follows:

- Host governments, not the United States, should play the leading role in hunting down terrorists.
- Terrorists should be subjected to relentless pressure by host government forces so that they cannot determine the tempo and timing of operations.
- Effective counterterrorist operations will be “information intensive,” relying on accurate information about the activities, locations, and identities of terrorists.
- Most important, host governments should seek to win the support of their populations, thus alienating terrorists from potential sources of support.

Based on these concepts, the primary role of U.S. military forces will often be to train, equip, advise, and assist host country forces in rooting out terrorist groups. U.S. forces will be called upon to forge strong relationships with host-country personnel, to show great discretion in their conduct of operations, to maintain a low profile in the host country, and to be able to react swiftly and effectively when promising targets arise.

The U.S. Air Force will be called upon to provide a host of important capabilities, assets, and skill sets to support counterterrorism operations abroad. Chief contributions will include surveillance platforms, operators, and analysts; language-qualified personnel to help train and advise host-country forces and to analyze human intelligence; security police and other force-protection assets; base operating support personnel and equipment to provide communications, housing, and transportation; heliborne insertion and extraction capabilities; and humanitarian relief assets. In some cases, U.S. airpower may be called upon to strike terrorists in base camps, hideouts, vehicles, and other locations.
