How Terrorist Groups End

Implications for Countering al Qa'ida

T he United States cannot conduct an effective counterterrorism campaign against al Qa'ida or other terrorist groups without understanding how such groups end. While it is clear that U.S. policymakers will need to turn to a range of policy instruments to conduct such campaigns—including careful police and intelligence work, military force, political negotiations, and economic sanctions—what is less clear is how they should prioritize U.S. efforts.

A recent RAND research effort sheds light on this issue by investigating how terrorist groups have ended in the past. By analyzing a comprehensive roster of terrorist groups that existed worldwide between 1968 and 2006, the authors found that most groups ended because of operations carried out by local police or intelligence agencies or because they negotiated a settlement with their governments. Military force was rarely the primary reason a terrorist group ended, and few groups within this time frame achieved victory.

These findings suggest that the U.S. approach to countering al Qa'ida has focused far too much on the use of military force. Instead, policing and intelligence should be the backbone of U.S. efforts.

First Systematic Examination of the End of Terrorist Groups

This was the first systematic look at how terrorist groups end. The authors compiled and analyzed a data set of all terrorist groups between 1968 and 2006, drawn from a terrorism-incident database that RAND and the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism jointly oversee. The authors used that data to identify the primary reason for the end of groups and to statistically analyze how economic conditions, regime type, size, ideology, and group goals affected their survival. They then conducted comparative case

Abstract

How do terrorist groups end? The evidence since 1968 indicates that terrorist groups rarely cease to exist as a result of winning or losing a military campaign. Rather, most groups end because of operations carried out by local police or intelligence agencies or because they join the political process. This suggests that the United States should pursue a counterterrorism strategy against al Qa'ida that emphasizes policing and intelligence gathering rather than a "war on terrorism" approach that relies heavily on military force.

studies of specific terrorist groups to understand how they ended.

Of the 648 groups that were active at some point between 1968 and 2006, a total of 268 ended during that period. Another 136 groups splintered, and 244 remained active. As depicted in the figure on the next page, the authors found that most ended for one of two reasons: They were penetrated and eliminated by local police and intelligence agencies (40 percent), or they reached a peaceful political accommodation with their government (43 percent). Most terrorist groups that ended because of politics sought narrow policy goals. The narrower the goals, the more likely the group was to achieve them through political accommodation—and thus the more likely the government and terrorists were to reach a negotiated settlement.

In 10 percent of cases, terrorist groups ended because they achieved victory. Military force led to the end of terrorist groups in 7 percent of cases. The authors found that militaries tended to be most effective when used against terrorist groups engaged in insurgencies in which

How 268 Terrorist Groups Worldwide Ended, 1968–2006

Military force
7%

Victory
10%

Politics
43%

Policing
40%
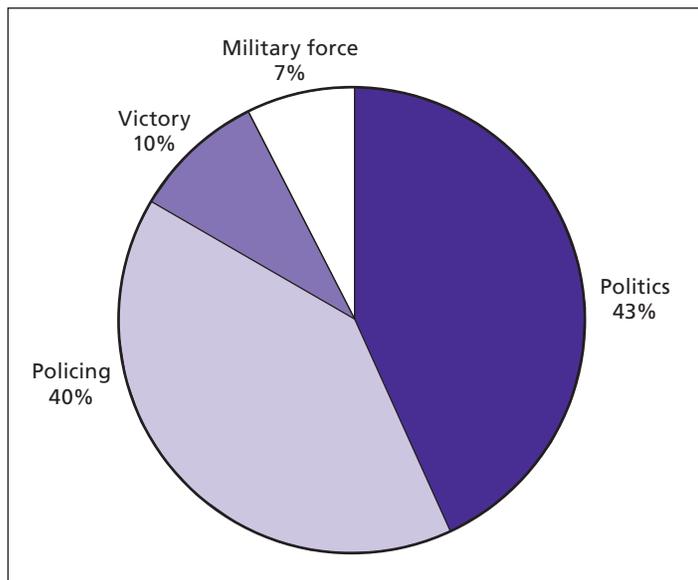
the groups were large, well armed, and well organized. But against most terrorist groups, military force was usually too blunt an instrument.

The analysis also found that

- religiously motivated terrorist groups took longer to eliminate than other groups but rarely achieved their objectives; no religiously motivated group achieved victory during the period studied.
- size significantly determined a group's fate. Groups exceeding 10,000 members were victorious more than 25 percent of the time, while victory was rare for groups below 1,000 members.
- 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.

Police-Oriented Counterterrorism Rather Than a "War on Terrorism"

What does this mean for counterterrorism efforts against al Qa'ida? After September 11, 2001, U.S. strategy against al Qa'ida concentrated on the use of military force. Although
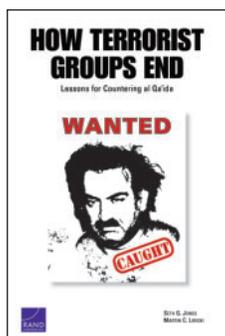
the United States has employed nonmilitary instruments—cutting off terrorist financing or providing foreign assistance, for example—U.S. policymakers continue to refer to the strategy as a "war on terrorism."

But military force has not undermined al Qa'ida. As of 2008, al Qa'ida has remained a strong and competent organization. Its goal is intact: to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate in the Middle East by uniting Muslims to fight infidels and overthrow West-friendly regimes. It continues to employ terrorism and has been involved in more terrorist attacks around the world in the years since September 11, 2001, than in prior years, though engaging in no successful attacks of a comparable magnitude to the attacks on New York and Washington.

Al Qa'ida's resilience should trigger a fundamental rethinking of U.S. strategy. Its goal of a pan-Islamic caliphate leaves little room for a negotiated political settlement with governments in the Middle East. A more effective U.S. approach would involve a two-front strategy:

- Make policing and intelligence the backbone of U.S. efforts. Al Qa'ida consists of a network of individuals who need to be tracked and arrested. This requires careful involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as their cooperation with foreign police and intelligence agencies.
- Minimize the use of U.S. military force. In most operations against al Qa'ida, local military forces frequently have more legitimacy to operate and a better understanding of the operating environment than U.S. forces have. This means a light U.S. military footprint or none at all.

Key to this strategy is replacing the war-on-terrorism orientation with the kind of counterterrorism approach that is employed by most governments facing significant terrorist threats today. Calling the efforts a war on terrorism raises public expectations—both in the United States and elsewhere—that there is a battlefield solution. It also tends to legitimize the terrorists' view that they are conducting a jihad (holy war) against the United States and elevates them to the status of holy warriors. Terrorists should be perceived as criminals, not holy warriors. ■

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