

A Critical Assessment of the US National Strategy for Counterterrorism: A Missed Opportunity? (ARI)

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Theme: Neither the new 2011 US National Strategy for Counterterrorism, nor the recently published counter-radicalisation strategy provide a template upon which Federal, State and local law enforcement and civilian agencies could effectively plan the future US defence against terrorism. Has an opportunity been lost?

Summary: The White House recently published two significant strategies outlining its approach to the threat of domestic terrorism from Islamic violent extremism. The National Strategy for Counterterrorism is a wide-ranging review of the challenges that currently face the US in its decade-long campaign against al-Qaeda. It is upbeat in tone after the death of Osama Bin Laden. However, the detailed descriptions of the nine theatres of counterterrorist operations across the world in which America is engaged are less optimistic. Critically, for the first time in a National Counterterrorism Strategy document, one of those theatres considered is the US Homeland itself. Faced with this new threat, America urgently requires a national domestic counterterrorism doctrine which can effectively unite the global reach of its counterterrorist intelligence community with the detailed domain awareness of its law-enforcement agencies. In addition, the White House also recently published a counter-radicalisation strategy, titled 'Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States'. However, this fails to offer much practical advice to the government's State and local partners. Consequently, America still needs a comprehensive inter-agency counter-radicalisation policy to address al-Qaeda's effective efforts 'on line' to recruit American Muslim youths to their cause.

Analysis: America is currently not short of challenges in the counterterrorism arena! The National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which was presented on 29 June 2011, attempts to review those challenges in a comprehensive manner. On the day of publication, the US was actively involved in military operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Libya. Covert counterterrorist operations range even further afield. The US military engagement in Afghanistan is now the longest war in the nation's history. The resultant cost of America's counterterrorism efforts in terms of US casualties and financial expenditure during the last 10 years has been incalculable. The world's political and economic landscape has been largely defined by America's counterterrorism effort. As the 2012 US Presidential election approaches, many Americans are now asking how the US can withdraw from these overseas wars in which it is engaged. The new National Counterterrorism Strategy tries to answer that question. It offers much that is familiar from previous strategies about degrading al-Qaeda's capability abroad and working with

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international partners to achieve success. It even goes so far as to suggest al-Qaeda is well on the path to defeat. However, it then outlines the counterterrorist situation in nine different theatres of operation across the world. Those summaries do not suggest that 'victory' against al-Qaeda, its affiliates and its sympathisers is imminent. Unfortunately, al-Qaeda-related terrorism against America and its interests, and the West in general, will remain a threat for the foreseeable future.

So how does this National Strategy for Counterterrorism differ from its predecessors? Undoubtedly the threat from terrorism has become more complex since 9/11. Most significantly, in addition to the military and intelligence campaigns overseas (and some would say directly because of them) America is now also facing a growing threat of terrorism from her own citizens within America. For the first time, the 2011 US National Strategy for Counterterrorism includes an account of this domestic threat and outlines measures to address it. Whilst many European countries have previously struggled with domestic terrorism, the need for an internal domestic counterterrorism strategy is comparatively new ground for the US Government. Critically, for the first time, this National Counterterrorism Strategy has acknowledged the link between the American counterterrorist policy conducted by its military, diplomatic and intelligence forces overseas and the related counterterrorist threat its citizens face at home.

The threat of domestic radicalisation was subsequently addressed by the White House in a second strategy published on 3 August 2011 titled 'Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States'.

This review considers these two new American strategies through a critical lens: are the domestic counterterrorist measures they outline enough? Is it a matter of too little, too late? Could the sacrifices of the American military and intelligence services overseas still be insufficient to prevent deadly terrorist attacks committed by US citizens occurring in the US? Is American government today truly prepared to wage a domestic counterterrorist campaign and to really engage in a struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of those elements within its own population who are vulnerable to radicalisation.

The Modern Counterterrorism Reality

Two overarching factors, which were not present on 9/11, must be considered before a verdict can be made regarding the domestic analysis outlined in the two Strategies. The first is the state of America's economy. 'It's the economy, stupid' is a political truism which is already casting a long shadow towards the 2012 Presidential campaign. Despite every political and financial effort, the Second Great Recession is showing little sign of economic recovery in the immediate future. This has far reaching consequences that will directly impact on the success –or failure– of America's domestic counterterrorism strategies. The US's ability to continue to deploy its armed forces overseas has now reached its limit. The Obama Administration has announced that overt military forces are scheduled to be withdrawn from both Iraq and Afghanistan in 2014. This offers the terrorists the opportunity to wait out the US in those critical theatres of operations and to then claim success as the 'Yankees go home'. Furthermore, in addition to the obvious internal political factors, on economic grounds alone, in the immediate future it is likely that the US electorate would oppose the deployment of overt US armies into the field to defeat terrorism at its source. The weakened state of the American economy will also limit the US's ability to 'nation build' in the ungoverned space of its international partners overseas who are vulnerable to al-Qaeda operations. This is highly significant as the

history of counterterrorism suggests a comprehensive ‘hearts and minds’ campaign is critical to a superpower’s eventual success in an overseas counterterrorist campaign.

In reality America’s future counterterrorism strategy will be executed overseas by its military Special Forces and the CIA. Their efforts will be largely tactical in nature, rather than strategically addressing the roots of militant terrorism. Regularly inflicting casualties on terrorists’ rank and file will not necessarily stop them coming. In some circles this approach has become known as ‘mowing the grass’ as the terrorists quickly come back. In addition, faced with huge budget deficits at home, US states and local governments are now reducing counterterrorism funding at the very time that the domestic terrorist threat is increasing. Consequently, just at the time when the White House appears to have recognised that the need for local engagement with America’s vulnerable communities has never been greater, numbers of police, necessary domestic counterterrorism training and Fusion Center¹ staffing are all likely to decline. Like overseas military counterterrorist expeditions, domestic counterterrorist preparation costs money and is expensive. Are the necessary dollars for homeland security going to be available in the next Administration?

The second major factor that requires detailed consideration is the world’s rate of technological change. This is occurring at the fastest rate in history and is having a dramatic impact on both international relations and the threat of terrorism. Whilst governments can now manipulate data about a citizen’s personal background, their travel histories and their finances, the rate of technical change, the sheer volume of data, privacy concerns, the expense of national IT projects and inter agency turf wars all limit a government’s effectiveness when handling bulk IT data. Compare that with the power the Internet has now provided a dissident or terrorist. Social networking by individuals has recently led to spontaneous revolutions across the Middle East in the ‘Arab Spring’. However, it remains to be seen whether the establishment of new governments in the Middle East actually reduce the threat of terrorism against the West. The National Counterterrorism Strategy claims that the ‘Arab Spring’ is a total defeat for al-Qaeda. Realistically, it is too early to make such a sweeping claim. Only time will tell. The individual frustration that sparked the ‘Arab Spring’ may in fact evolve into yet more terrorism aimed at the West. This is most likely to occur if the new regimes supported by the US turn out to be no better for their populations than those that the popular uprisings replaced. Does anyone really know what will happen next in Egypt and Libya? In both countries al-Qaeda will obviously remain alert to recruit another generation of disillusioned Muslim youths to its ranks. The role of social networking during the recent riots in the UK demonstrate how technological change can also be utilised by criminals (and terrorists?) as well as by the State.

Current Counterterrorism in the US Homeland

Both recent US strategies admit that radicalisation is now a significant terrorist threat in the US. The Internet has demonstrated that it is a potent source of terrorist ideology, encouragement and training. The publication of ‘Inspire’ by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a particularly ominous development. It is written by American terrorists overseas solely to generate further terrorist attacks by Americans in America.

¹ Since 9/11 Fusion Centers have been established in all 50 US states and in many of the major American cities. The Centers are multi-agency organisations which intended to facilitate intelligence-sharing between the Federal agencies and the State and local police, fire and health departments. Their size, capability and effectiveness vary considerably amongst the 72 Fusion Centers that have been stood up. Currently there is no standardised approach to their role or function. They are likely to suffer considerable cuts as the Federal and State CT budgets shrink.

The Web is the new virtual environment where highly-publicised international Cyber warfare is currently raging. The Web is also where the battle for the 'hearts and minds' of the next generation, both at home and overseas, is taking place. Are America and the West really prepared and organised to engage in this new virtual theatre? The Counterterrorism Strategy's section on 'Information and Ideas: al-Qaeda's Ideology, Messaging, and Resonance' rightly recognises that further work is necessary to prepare a Western 'narrative' in response to the Jihadi message. But this is missing in the second strategy which talks of US ideals and values without offering specifics on how local US partners should effectively engage on the Web.

In terms of responding to the terrorist threat from overseas and within the US, this development of an effective counter al-Qaeda message is vital. It is disappointing that so little has been achieved in this area since 11 September 2001.

The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism 'Homeland' section reflects the response to the domestic threat explained earlier in the Strategy. However, this early section contains no analysis of that threat whatsoever. There is no mention of the terrorist attacks that have caused 14 fatalities within the US (Little Rock and Fort Hood) or of the significant plots which could have inflicted even greater mass casualties. The intention of terrorists such as Abdulmuttalab over Detroit on 25 December 2009 and Shazad in New York's Times Square on 1 May 2010 was clear: the death and injury of as many fellow Americans as possible. Had either of those attacks been successful, then undoubtedly the National Strategy for Counterterrorism would be completely different. The domestic terrorist threat is based on a clear trend. Of the 175 cases of radicalisation that have occurred in the US since 9/11, 'nearly half' have taken place in the last two years.² Surely a National Strategy for Counterterrorism should begin by clearly explaining the actual domestic terrorist threat?

Regarding defence within the US, the Counterterrorism Strategy states 'we have made massive investments in our aviation, maritime, and border-security capabilities and information sharing to make the US a hardened and increasingly difficult target for terrorists to penetrate'. But is this actually an appropriate response to the current internal terrorist domestic threat? All the TSA hi-tech equipment at the border does not stop the radicalisation of American citizens who are already here. A comprehensive counterterrorism strategy needs to consider how to identify and interdict these potential terrorists as far *before* a bombing or Mumbai style attack as possible. There has to be an offensive element of a domestic counterterrorism strategy at home as well as the US military's offensive operations abroad. A counterterrorism strategy's defensive aspects are static and involve the protection of key points and possible terrorist targets, along with preparations on how best to respond and to recover from a terrorist attack. However, the key to a successful domestic counterterrorism strategy is actually identifying the terrorist as early as possible ('Left of Boom'). Once found, the nation's domestic intelligence gathering techniques can then be fully deployed to identify linkages to other terrorist networks at home and overseas, to develop a comprehensive evidential case and to effect arrests without causing alienation within the community where the terrorist cell resides. A long running counterterrorist investigation might last years and its operational phase can involve months of intense surveillance and technical coverage. The national, state and local coordination required to effectively run such an operation through to

² 'Post 9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases involving US Citizens and Residents', A Study by the New America Foundation and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Public Policy, March 2011, <http://homegrown.newamerica.net/>.

arrests and convictions without leaks to the Press is a serious challenge for every government facing a terrorist threat. To achieve success, history suggests a comprehensive national counterterrorist operational doctrine is required. The National Strategy for Counterterrorism should be the vehicle to outline the importance and role of such a doctrine.

Unfortunately, that opportunity has been missed. Indeed currently there is *no* national counterterrorism operational doctrine in the US. Counterterrorism operations are centrally run by the FBI with local inter-agency coordination largely dependent on its recent history and relationships with the local police. Accordingly, with over 18,600 different law enforcement agencies, 100 FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces and 72 Fusion Centers across the US, the level of inter-agency 'information sharing' varies considerably from place to place. This would not matter if all the significant domestic counterterrorism leads were acquired by the United States Intelligence Community (USIC) and managed 'top down'. However, as the Strategy acknowledges, the threat is now 'bottom up'. The newly observed radicalisation which leads to domestic terrorism is a *local* activity. It can also occur miles away from the terrorists' eventual target. Consequently, the recognition of a developing threat is an intensely local activity. The FBI is spread too thin. The only agency that can provide the detailed domain awareness to spot radicalisation early is the local police department with their myriad contacts into the local community. The uniformed cop now needs to be the 'First Preventer' as well as the 'First Responder'.

The vital counterterrorism requirement to identify potential terrorists early requires the active engagement of all police departments of all sizes –large and small–. Since over 80% of US police forces are under 25-men strong, their need for counterterrorist training is paramount. Unfortunately, whilst the domestic terrorist threat is increasing, at the moment many policemen do not appreciate their expanded counterterrorist role, most receive next to no counterterrorist training and most police forces do not have the necessary intelligence-gathering networks coverage to provide early warning of potential terrorism in their jurisdictions. These early warning signs are difficult to collate. An individual who rents a self-storage facility for cash does not necessarily signify terrorism. But if that same individual has withdrawn from his community, recently acquired weapons or hydrogen peroxide and established contact with an extremist website, then he is worth further investigation. Who within the local police is 'connecting those dots'? Forwarding numerous Suspicious Activity Reports to the FBI or local Fusion Center may be useful, but who can actually provide detailed analysis of that data at that level? There are insufficient trained staff at this level as well.

Faced with these real operational challenges, a counterterrorist doctrine is necessary to seamlessly combine local collection and analysis with national and international counterterrorist intelligence. A comprehensive counterterrorism doctrine might also provide the basis for uniform nationwide counterterrorist training which could ensure the multitude of Federal, State and local agencies involved are properly employed. Whilst the new Strategy lists many of the technical surveillance tools used in homeland security across the US today, the absence of any national domestic counterterrorism doctrine remains a major vulnerability which this National Strategy does not address.

Finally, in the Counterterrorism Strategy, the White House promises 'comprehensive reviews and corrective actions in the aftermath of attempted attacks'. Obviously, these after-action reports are essential, but surely the identification of counterterrorism weaknesses should be an on-going process as Federal, State and locals combine

regularly to develop ever-improving local defences against terrorism? The glaring lack of police counterterrorist training suggests that the US currently lacks such a coordinated system. That shortfall should be addressed *before* further casualties have been suffered.

Turning to the battle for 'hearts and minds', the difficulties of developing a coherent counter radicalisation strategy should also not be underestimated. The 'Prevent Violent Extremism' Strategy correctly states that 'the best defenses against violent extremist ideologies are well informed and equipped families, local communities and local institutions'. It goes on to accurately observe that 'a one-size-fits-all approach' would not work in the variety of communities and cities across the US. Instead, the Strategy encourages community leaders and local stakeholders to develop solutions tailored to their own particular circumstances.

All this is obviously laudable, but there is no practical advice on how these goals can be achieved. Whilst community relations are obviously vital, how do they actually support a counter-radicalisation strategy? Are communities expected to report suspects to the FBI or police? Will Federal government fund counter radicalisation initiatives at State and local level? How will all the branches of the US government at Federal, State and local level be mobilised to reduce the siren call of Inspire magazine and extremist chat rooms? How does the government's message reach some of the disaffected amongst the American Muslim population who have already suffered latent discrimination during the 10 years since 9/11? Every Muslim community in the US has complained that innocent US Muslim citizens have suffered overt harassment by uniformed police officers, have experienced regular security searches when travelling through US airports and have had their mosques put under inappropriate surveillance. The recent outcry over the building of a new mosque near Ground Zero in New York and the burning of the Koran by a Christian religious zealot in Florida are high-profile examples of the current inter-community tension across the US. As a result, disillusionment with US law enforcement agencies is now common among a significant minority within the US Muslim population. How can economics, education, health and welfare, policing and foreign policy all be integrated into a comprehensive programme to promote good citizenship which local politicians, opinion formers and community leaders can explain to these individuals who are now 'at risk' of falling prey to the jihadi message? The failure of the US to fully combat drugs in its society offers little grounds for optimism that a 'just say no' will be fully effective against the threat of radicalisation. Today, *who* in Federal government is actually responsible for America's nascent counter-radicalisation programme? The 'Prevent Violent Extremism' strategy is silent on this critical point.

The Future Terrorist Threat in the US

All experts agree that it is likely a successful terrorist attack will occur in the US in the relatively near future. As the Provisional IRA commented after its failed attempt to assassinate the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in 1984 'Today, you were lucky. But you have to be lucky every time. We only have to be lucky once'. Eventually, al-Qaeda will be lucky. Over time their American terrorists will become more professional and increasingly more security conscious. They will learn from the operational mistakes committed by their numerous fellow militants who have been convicted for terrorism in US and UK courts. Meanwhile, domestic Federal, State and local homeland security resources are spread thin in the depths of an economic recession and in light of measures to address the huge Federal deficit. So, in summary, Americans should accept that it is a matter of 'When, not If' a terrorist attack occurs.

In light of this threat, do these Strategies offer any real reassurance that such an attack will be prevented? Unfortunately not. But is an attack critical to the future of America? Well, only if a terrorist detonates a Weapon of Mass Destruction. Meanwhile, every year the US experiences large scale shootings during which deranged individuals gun down relatively large numbers of their fellow citizens at universities, schools or political events. Yet there is no national outcry after such atrocities. Shouldn't the American politicians, press and population view terrorism in a similar light? Since 9/11 only 14 Americans have died through al-Qaeda-related terrorism within the US. Thirteen of those were in one incident at Fort Hood, Texas, and the last was the murdered soldier in a recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas. Is the fear of terrorism in the US now out of proportion to the actual risk?

Consequently, these strategies could be a good basis for a more balanced discussion about what should happen *after* that successful attack. Rather than rushed organisational change during a political and media firestorm, such as the dismemberment of the FBI and the introduction of 'an American MI5', now would be a good opportunity to realistically review the new domestic terrorist threat, consider the establishment of a national domestic inter-agency counterterrorist doctrine, fully harness the local knowledge and expertise of the American police forces in the counterterrorism battle and to address the need for a comprehensive national counter-radicalisation structure and policy.

History demonstrates that communities defeat terrorism. The US is now in a battle for 'the hearts and minds' of its 15-year-olds. These are the citizens who could become the terrorists within the next decade. Their decision rests on their education, economic prospects and social status in the America of tomorrow. This is a battle between 'the American Dream', which offers wealth and social mobility in return for innovation and industry, and a perverted version of Islam, which promotes a vision of paradise in the afterlife, gained through the nihilistic act of becoming a suicide bomber here today. For earlier waves of immigrants 'the American Dream' was sufficient to generate loyalty to the US flag and the dynamism to propel America to become the world's superpower. Is that still the case today? The American Islamic population is not the cause of terrorism; rather the American people, in all their diverse communities, are its solution. Yet to answer the evolving threat of domestic terrorism in the future, a comprehensive counter-radicalisation programme is desperately required to harness Federal, State, local and communities in that battle for 'hearts and minds'. Could these strategies trigger the measured debate required to develop such a programme? If this occurs, then they will be acknowledged as a success. If they do not, then they remain just another two examples of political propaganda.

Conclusion: This critique questions whether America today has effectively responded to the new domestic terrorist threat.

Its conclusion is that it has not. Al-Qaeda's capability to radicalise US youth through ever developing technology means Internet propaganda such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's 'Inspire' magazine is causing significant concern. Despite the recognition of these challenges in the strategies, and in the face of the increasing domestic threat, the US currently has no overarching Counterterrorism doctrine which effectively harnesses Federal, State and local law enforcement agencies in the counterterrorist fight. The lack of counterterrorist doctrine also hinders the counterterrorist training available to US police which is a mixture of the good, the bad and the ugly.

In addition, a detailed national counter radicalization strategy is now needed to engage in a domestic battle for the 'hearts and minds' of teenagers within US communities. America is now locked in a new struggle which pitches 'the American Dream' against the ideology of violent Jihad. So far, the US has not really engaged in this ideological debate, either in its communities themselves or on the virtual IT battlefield. The strategies will only be successful if they generate further discussions within the US Government on how to properly progress an effective national counterterrorist doctrine for its law enforcement agencies and a national counter-radicalisation strategy for its youth. Will this now occur?

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