

# The War in Afghanistan and Better Approaches to Ending Terrorism

"After September 11, 2001, increases in annual US Department of Defense spending dwarfed increases in spending for all other departments critical to counterterrorism combined (US Department of Justice, US Department of State, and US Department of Homeland Security) by five to one, even when the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were excluded."

- From the 2008 Rand Corporation report, "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda."

"As we ask our military to become the leading edge of our international engagement, we are putting a security face on that engagement. However benign and well-intended our forces, for other nations and peoples this can create a backlash against our policies and our presence. In the end, leading with our military chin could have the effect of endangering, rather than increasing, American security."

- Gordon Adams, Woodrow Wilson International Center, Testimony to the Senate Budget Committee, February 6, 2007

On September 20th, 2001, in a speech to a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush declared the beginning of a "Global War on Terror." The speech was followed by the invasion of Afghanistan in October. Seven years later, the "War on Terror" has proven to be a counterproductive framework for addressing the threat of terrorism; it has in fact undermined long-term US security. In waging this war, the Bush administration has diverted resources and attention from more tested strategies that succeed in reducing terrorism.

The "War on Terror" has not reduced Al Qaeda's influence or activity. In the six years following the invasion of Afghanistan, Al Qaeda was involved in more terrorist attacks than it had been in the previous six years, not counting attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> US casualties are increasing, with American troops dying in Afghanistan in 2008 than in any previous year.<sup>2</sup> According to the bipartisan Terrorism Index of 2008, 71 percent of the more than 100 top US foreign policy experts surveyed believe a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11 is "likely or certain within the next decade."<sup>3</sup> Continued US air strikes and their resulting civilian casualties have increased tensions between the US and Afghan governments. The severity of the attacks and the ensuing anger compelled Defense Secretary Robert Gates to travel to Kabul and apologize.<sup>4</sup>

During the last seven years, the Bush administration has disproportionately focused on the blunt instrument of military force in lieu of more effective tools for combating terrorism. According to a RAND Corporation report, since 1968, only seven percent of all terrorist groups that have ended were taken down by military force. In contrast, 40 percent of those groups were defeated through police and intelligence work, and 43 percent gave up terrorism as they were integrated into the political process.<sup>5</sup> The framework of the "Global War on Terror" has set up unrealistic expectations of a military victory against non-state actors, and the apportioning of counterterrorism resources has reflected that flawed approach.

Increasing troop levels in Afghanistan would be a continuation of the deeply misguided strategy that failed under President Bush. In order to make the world safer from terrorism, the US needs to fundamentally redefine the problem, and invest its resources in a comprehensive new counterterrorism strategy based on a diversity of tactics with a concrete history of success.

The new president and Congress should:

1. Replace the "Global War on Terror" framework with a counterterrorism strategy based on proven methods. Terrorists are criminals, not armies at war with the United States, and the Bush administration's war footing has obscured more pragmatic approaches and fed anti-American sentiment. Our new political leadership should set aside the ideologically charged rhetoric of the "War on Terror," and instead adopt the pragmatic language, and tactics, of "counterterrorism."

2. Focus resources on policing and intelligence. Targeted police work, including the use of human intelligence, has proved to be one of the most effective methods for combating terrorism. This could include work by US intelligence

agencies as well as cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies and police. Local police are more likely than US troops to have a permanent presence in key areas and understand the local threat environment.

3. Engage in robust diplomacy with stakeholders in the region. In 2001, Iran cooperated with the US following the invasion of Afghanistan and contributed millions of dollars in reconstruction funds.<sup>6</sup> Iran is an influential regional power and has a shared interest in stabilizing Afghanistan. The US should work closely with Iran and other stakeholders such as Pakistan, India, and Russia.

4. Support negotiations with elements of the Taliban. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has expressed interest in pursuing diplomatic negotiations with elements of the Taliban willing to accept the sovereignty of the Afghan government. The US should follow through on Defense Secretary Robert Gates' stated support for the concept. As Gates noted in October of 2008, "At the end of the day, that's how most wars end...That's ultimately the exit strategy for all of us."<sup>7</sup>

5. Strengthen and deploy non-military aid and engagement. The US should strengthen foreign policy tools other than military force, particularly in the State Department. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted, "There is a need for a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development."<sup>8</sup> Non-military assistance will be instrumental in securing the cooperation of local civilian populations, which will be critical in building an effective counterterrorism strategy. Greater economic opportunity will also help alleviate grievances that make terrorist recruitment easier.

6. Reduce the US military footprint in Afghanistan with the goal of complete withdrawal of US troops. Blunt military force is ineffective in eradicating terrorist groups; it merely causes them to relocate. The heavy reliance on military force, especially air strikes, also alienates the local population and undermines political reconciliation. The US should work with the international community to build the Afghan police and military, and arrange for non-US peacekeeping forces if necessary.

7. Develop a comprehensive plan for cooperation with Pakistan on counterterrorism and development. Pakistan is an integral partner in fighting terrorism and stabilizing Afghanistan, and is caught in a complex web of regional issues and security concerns. US policy has been over reliant on military aid, sending unaccountable funds without clear progress.<sup>9</sup> The US should use political, economic and diplomatic tools to work effectively with Pakistan. In addition, the US should cease cross-border raids into Pakistan without the permission of the Pakistani government. Retired Army Major General Mahmud Ali Durrani, a key player in Pakistan's national security and former ambassador to the US, said of the raids, "It is doing exactly the opposite of what you are trying to do. We are trying to separate the good guys from the bad guys, trying to separate the tribes from the militants."<sup>10</sup> We made it abundantly clear that this [attack] was pushing them together and creating sympathy for the militants." The US must build trust with the Pakistani people and government and use funds effectively for development and targeted counterterrorism efforts.

#### Footnotes

1. "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida," Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, Rand Corporation, 2008, p.110

2. "2008 Marks Deadliest Year for U.S. Troops in Afghanistan," CNN.com, September 11, 2008

3. "The Terrorism Index 2008," Foreign Policy Magazine and the Center for American Progress, Foreign Policy Magazine, September/October 2008

4. "U.S. vows to back off if fighters use Afghan civilians as cover," CNN.com, November 9, 2008

5. "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida," Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, Rand Corporation, 2008, p.110

6. "The Contributions of Iran," Lawrence J. Korb and Laura Conley, The Boston Globe, October 24, 2008

7. "Gates: U.S. would support Afghan peace talks with Taliban," Mike Mount, CNN, October 10, 2008

8. "Partnership for Progress: Advancing a New Strategy for Prosperity and Stability in Pakistan and the Region," Caroline Wadhams, Brian Katulis, Lawrence Korb, and Colin Cookman; Center for American Progress, November 2008

9. Ibid.

10. "No Predators Please," Ron Moreau, Newsweek, November 7, 2008