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9/11: Yesterday and tomorrow / How we could lose the war on terror

John Arquilla

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The war on terror has become a global intifada, but despite our all- out commitment we're not much safer than before 9-11.

As the conflict enters its third year, the greatest threat is that our failure to cripple al Qaeda and its allies will inspire the rise of even more terror networks. The dark, looming

specter is the possibility that 10 years from now, there will be 10 al Qaedas -- fanatical, highly organized and well disciplined terror networks, some of them in secret service to rogue (or maybe not-so-roguish) nations that really do possess weapons of mass destruction.

This troubling future must not come to pass because it heralds a world in which the backbone of our national defense, security-through-deterrence, will lie in tatters. How is one to threaten retaliation against a network with no identifiable territory of its own?

Current U.S. counter-terror doctrine, which is shifting from deterrence to preemption, features two core elements, each of which has proved counterproductive.

First, the focus on attacking nations has caused us to be distracted from the prime mission of ripping apart terror networks. Our occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq have not pacified either country. Our forces in each land must live now in environments that have become hothouses for terror. Afghanistan is now home to more terrorist training camps than it harbored prior to Operation Enduring Freedom in the fall of 2001. The terrorists, it seems, have endured freedom quite ably.

The situation is much like the dilemma described in John Steinbeck's World War II-era story, "The Moon Is Down." Dr. Winter, a small-town physician, tells Col. Lanser, the occupation commander, that "the flies have conquered the flypaper." Steinbeck names neither Norway nor the Nazis explicitly, but the message is clear and timeless: A resistance network has the power to prevail against an enemy whose strategy is based on territorial conquest.

The second problem with U.S. strategy in the terror war is that as networks become targets, we concentrate far too much on going after their leaders. True networks don't require much centralized control. Osama bin Laden may be dead. Hambali (leader of the Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah) is in custody. And only 15 "cards" remain



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free in that notorious deck of wanted Iraqi leaders. But still, al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah are potent threats, and a grassroots Iraqi "Faith Campaign" is gathering steam as a broad-based resistance movement.

We must see that networks are about individual initiative and creativity rather than about "great man" leadership. This has already been proved true in cutting-edge business networks over the past decade. Now we know that it is true of terrorist organizations as well.

Though al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and their cohorts all feature a very resilient form of organization that has kept them on their feet despite serious losses, none can hope for victory in a straightforward confrontation with U.S. forces. This constraint on their taking direct military action makes very appealing to them a strategy based on episodic attacks distributed widely over time and space

As they look at the Palestinian struggle for statehood, terrorist networks take heart from seeing Israel's inability to defeat [Hamas](#) and the Palestinian [Islamic Jihad](#), both of which are themselves highly networked organizations. Despite all that Israel's defense forces have hurled at them, the terrorists still hold the initiative, deciding when and where to strike next.

The fact that most Israelis now agree that an independent Palestinian state must be created is yet another sign that even a stern opponent like Israel can eventually be ground down by a terror-based war of attrition.

Just as the Palestinian intifada encourages al Qaeda and its dark allies to believe that in the long run their triumph is inevitable, they are also emboldened by the growing U.S. sensitivity to the steadily mounting casualties in Iraq. A decade ago, the deaths of just 18 U.S. soldiers in a firefight in Somalia led to an embarrassing withdrawal from that sad land.

The mistakes in the U.S. campaign plan are natural, understandable ones. In the long history of conflict, occupying territory and eliminating enemy leaders have generally gone hand in hand with victory.

But in the current era, the destructive and disruptive power of even very small groups grows at a cancerous rate. In such a world, taking ground simply exposes a force to more widely distributed attacks. And chasing down enemy leaders is counterproductive when there is no central control of an enemy force that is widely dispersed in small cells.

What can we do to start winning the war on terror?

A first step is to learn as much from the intifada as our adversaries have. Aside from analyzing how the Palestinians have persisted, there is much to gain from considering the moves the Israelis have made. Their best adjustment has been to cease thinking in territorial terms.

A few years ago, Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon rather than continue to subject themselves to continual attacks from [Hezbollah](#), yet another vibrant terror network. And now, instead of thinking about permanent occupation, the Israelis engage in brief, violent incursions -- very much like the characteristic Arab fighting technique of "attack and withdrawal" described by the 14th Century Muslim scholar [Ibn Khaldun](#).

This lesson from the intifada means we should avoid going out and conquering any more

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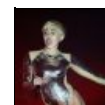
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FROM OUR HOMEPAGE

"flypaper." Instead, our forces should prepare to operate in a swift, swarming raiding style, anywhere in the world.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, eschewing territorial conquest should encourage us to hand off these nettlesome occupations to the United Nations -- although we ought to retain a capacity for making lightning raids with special operations forces if and whenever terrorists come out of hiding.

Our British allies have also had much experience in dealing with terrorists and insurgents. When conventional military operations and bombing failed to defeat the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya in the 1950s, the British formed teams of friendly Kikuyu tribesmen who went about pretending to be terrorists. These "pseudo gangs," as they were called, swiftly threw the Mau Mau on the defensive, either by befriending and then ambushing bands of fighters or by guiding bombers to the terrorists' camps.

What worked in Kenya a half-century ago has a wonderful chance of undermining trust and recruitment among today's terror networks. Forming new pseudo gangs should not be difficult. If a confused young man from Marin County can join up with al Qaeda, think what professional operatives might do.

One last adjustment to our war strategy is needed: We must stop trumpeting our role as the leader in this conflict. Instead, we should reinvent ourselves simply as equal members of a worldwide counterterror network. If we can find some of the "humility" with which President Bush once said he would conduct U. S. foreign policy, we might find that our allies have much to bring to this conflict. We might find that the ultimate lesson of these first two years of the war is that it takes a network to fight a network.

If we learn to network better, we can make the case more convincingly that this war is not bin Laden's "clash of civilizations" but rather a fight for the future based on ethical and universal values adhered to by civilized countries around the globe.

If any lasting good comes from this war, it will be that, in response to a broad-based terrorist uprising, a global civil society arises, mastering the current challenge and changing the world forever for the better.

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