9/11 ten years on: Terrorism as a manageable risk

Author(s):
Möckli, Daniel

Publication Date:
2011

Permanent Link:
https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-a-006570503

Rights / License:
In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted
The threat of jihadist terrorism has evolved in recent years. The core organisation of al-Qaida is weakened. The large majority of other Islamist extremist organisations have not followed its call for global jihad and are pursuing more local agendas. Homegrown terrorists remain a challenge for Western security, especially if they have ties to established jihadist groups. Current counterterrorism works, however, to the extent that the probability of mass-casualty attacks in the US and Europe has diminished. Terrorism is a real but manageable risk that Western governments should no longer overemphasise.
Ten years after al-Qaida’s coor-
dinated mass-casualty attacks on
the US, many effects of 11 Septem-
ber 2001 are still visible. Islamist
extremist violence continues to be
widely perceived as a major threat to
global security. Recurring terrorism
alerts and news about successful or
foiled attacks serve as forceful remind-
ers that this is a threat that could hit
anyone anytime. Aviation security and
infrastructure protection remain ma-
jor public concerns. Counterterrorism
capabilities in law enforcement, intel-
ligence, and the military have all been
enhanced. Geopolitically, the conse-
quences of 9/11 are still unfolding, with
the Iraq War changing the balance of
power in the Middle East and the war in
Afghanistan reaching new levels of
intensity.

For all these repercussions, 9/11 has
not brought about strategic change to
the international system. It illustrated
the globalisation of security threats
and the empowerment of non-state
actors. It also had a tremendous im-
pact on US foreign policy for several
years. Yet, with the US gradually mod-
ifying its counterterrorism approach,
al-Qaida has not succeeded in pro-
voking the West into a clash of civil-
sations. This is notwithstanding
growing anti-Muslim and anti-Amer-
ican sentiment in certain parts of the
world. Nor has al-Qaida become a
mass movement. The core organisa-
tion of al-Qaida has been significant-
ly weakened. Al-Qaida’s ideology has
lost much support in Muslim coun-
ctries. The vast majority of Islamist
extremist groups have not picked up
the call for global jihad and continue
to pursue more local agendas.

Seen from the perspective of West-
ern security, Islamist extremist
violence has not become an
existential threat as was frequently
predicted after 9/11. Rather, it should
be perceived as an ongoing but
manageable risk. Current counter-
terrorism policies are effective to the
extent that the likelihood of com-
plex and catastrophic attacks against
the homeland of Western countries
has substantially decreased. The
jihadist threat to Europe and the US
no doubt remains real, with ‘home-
grown’ radicals that have ties to al-
Qaida-related terror organisations
being a particular source of concern.
However, potential terrorist attacks
are likely to be limited in scale and
conventional in nature over the com-
ing years.

Shifting from managing to resol-
ving the problem of jihadist ter-
rorism may be too ambitious an
objective, as strategic counterterror-
ism is beset with major challenges.
The fight against terrorism is set
to stay and will continue to require considerable resources. Yet, terrorism is a threat that should no longer be overemphasised at the expense of other security challenges. Issues relating to the transformation of the international system and regional developments in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere will likely top the strategic agenda of Western countries in the coming years.

An evolving threat
The jihadist threat has evolved significantly in the past years. The capacity of al-Qaida Central (i.e., the core organisation around Osama Bin Laden) to launch complex and catastrophic attacks has been diminished. Al-Qaida’s ideology and brand have however been taken up by some other terror organisations. These regional al-Qaida affiliates embrace the call for global jihad to some extent. But their grievances and objectives – and in most cases, also their operative range – are tied to specific local contexts.

The same holds true for most other Islamist extremist groups. Al-Qaida’s concept of global jihad is being marginalised in Islamic religious and political discourse. Most of the groups that operate on the premise of jihad continue to follow the classical interpretation of a defensive struggle against oppression in Muslim countries. Going after the ‘near enemy’, they still may hit not just national regimes and security forces, but also local Western targets. But they do not subscribe to al-Qaida’s reinterpretation of jihad in global and more offensive terms. Hitting the ‘far enemy’, i.e. launching attacks against the US homeland and other Western countries, is not what they are after.

In Europe, and increasingly in the US as well, there is the additional threat of homegrown radicalisation. Evidence suggests that the damage homegrown jihadists can cause depends significantly on whether they are self-inspired and acting autonomously or trained and guided by established terrorist organisations. The most likely current scenarios of homegrown terrorism concern attacks of limited scale with traditional terrorist methods such as armed assault and improvised explosives.

Overall, the diversification of Islamist extremist violence in recent years has rendered the jihadist threat more diffuse. It has also meant that the threat for Western homelands, while still real, has been reduced. Muslim-majority countries, rather than the West, are the main target of terrorist attacks.
Al-Qaida Central weakened

Founded in the late 1980s, al-Qaida began to demonstrate its ability to implement devastating attacks against Western targets a decade later. The 1998 US embassy bombings in East Africa resulted in more than 300 deaths. Two years later, al-Qaida launched an attack against the US Navy destroyer USS Cole in the Yemeni port of Aden that killed 17 sailors and damaged the vessel. In the suicide attacks of 9/11, 19 al-Qaida terrorists managed to hijack four commercial airliners simultaneously, intentionally crashing two of them into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and a third into the Pentagon outside Washington. With nearly 3,000 victims from more than 90 countries, 9/11 catapulted al-Qaida into the limelight of world public attention and put the threat of large-scale Islamist extremist violence at the top of the international security agenda.

In the years since 9/11, the core organisation of al-Qaida has continued to be involved in the planning and conduct of terrorist attacks. Its capacity to do so has diminished, however, as it has moved into the focus of counterterrorism efforts. Some of its top leaders, including Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahri, are still at large. Yet, they are on the run, presumably hiding in the secluded tribal belt of northwest Pakistan.

There are indications that al-Qaida Central barely functions as an effective organisation anymore. According to US government sources, there are at most 50 to 100 members left in Afghanistan, and perhaps 300 in Pakistan. Many cadre members have been killed and are difficult to replace. Compelled to lie low, the top leadership is issuing fewer and fewer audio and video messages. Overseas funding has gone down dramatically. The facilities for training have largely been destroyed, which is why training sessions are much shorter and less sophisticated today, with trainees being asked to provide for their own funding.

Experts disagree about the extent to which the leaders of al-Qaida Central are still able to play a role in operative decisionmaking for terrorist attacks. But it seems clear that what used to be a hierarchically structured organisation has turned into a dispersed grouping that is increasingly dependent on other jihadist organisations to achieve operational effect.
Al-Qaida affiliates: Local insurgents with a global brand?
In the aftermath of 9/11, a series of other jihadist organisations pledged allegiance to al-Qaida and in some cases have taken up its name. Al-Qaida in Iraq was founded in 2003 in response to the US invasion. Initially mainly consisting of foreign jihadists, it played a major role in the violent upheavals in post-Saddam Iraq. While it was substantially weakened once the Sunni tribes turned against it, the group has recently become more active again and today is a more indigenous organisation run by Iraqi nationals. Also in the Middle East, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in 2009 as a merger of two al-Qaida groupings active in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. It operates mainly from Yemeni territory and is believed to consist of several hundred fighters today.

In Africa, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat that emerged in Algeria in the 1990s changed its name to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006. It operates in Algeria and the Sahel...
region and is funding itself through kidnapping and trafficking (see also Chapter 4 in this publication). Finally, there is the Somali Islamist movement al-Shabaab that seeks to overthrow the Somali government and controls most of the southern parts of the country. Comprising both Somali insurgents and foreign jihadists, this grouping officially confirmed its alignment with al-Qaida in 2010.

The existence of such affiliates has prompted analysts to describe al-Qaida today as a ‘movement’ or ‘network’ whose centre of gravity is constantly shifting. Such notions can be misleading, though. Although the links of these regional affiliates to al-Qaida Central vary, all these organisations appear largely self-sustaining today. In some cases, such as AQIM, the alignment with al-Qaida has resulted in a shift of tactics, with suicide attacks becoming more prominent. However, in terms of ideological underpinnings and strategic objectives, there are differences between most of the affiliates and al-Qaida Central.

Affiliates in Iraq, the Maghreb, and Somalia are essentially local insurgent groups pursuing a domestic or regional agenda and fighting the ‘near enemy’. They do share the anti-Western rhetoric of al-Qaida Central and indeed have all attacked not only governments, but also local Western targets within their reach. But there is little indication in practice that they are eager – or indeed able – to focus on global jihad and go after the ‘far enemy’ in the US or in Europe.

The case of AQAP is different. This group has tried to blow up a commercial airplane over Detroit and two cargo planes flying to the US. It also issues an English-language jihadist magazine. However, although AQAP incorporates al-Qaida’s global objectives to some extent, it still seems to have predominantly local aspirations and is mainly driven by local grievances. Moreover, it has yet to demonstrate its ability to implement a successful mass-casualty attack in the West.

Although AQAP and AQIM, at least, can be described as transnational organisations, the overall impression is that most regional affiliates of al-Qaida are not really part of a global project in any extensive way. Some of them may have picked up the al-Qaida logo mainly to attract international attention and prestige. Others continue to be divided over what the al-Qaida brand should actually mean for them.

Beyond the official affiliates, there are other groups with ties to al-Qaida.
Although these groups have refrained from pledging allegiance to al-Qaida, they must be taken into account when assessing the global jihadist threat. In Pakistan, groups like the Pakistani Taliban or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are said to collaborate with al-Qaida. One reason why they have not formally aligned may simply be that the al-Qaida logo is certain to spur international counterterrorism efforts. Yet, again, these organisations are much more rooted in local contexts than al-Qaida Central. Some analysts predict that LeT has both the intention and the capacity to go global and become the ‘next al-Qaida’. They point out that LeT went after Western and Jewish targets in the Mumbai attacks of 2008 (with 173 deaths), has listed more than 300 potential international targets, and is already running logistical and funding cells outside of South Asia. The extent to which LeT is really going beyond its anti-Indian agenda remains however to be seen.

Decreasing appeal

Given the concerns after 9/11 of a global jihadist mass movement, it is remarkable that an overwhelming majority of Islamist extremist organisations have kept their distance from al-Qaida’s ideology and global outlook. This holds true for terrorist organisations in East Asia like Abu Sayyaf as well as for most Islamist extremist groupings in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus. Even the Afghan Taliban have started to dissociate themselves from al-Qaida and frame their insurgency in national terms today to enhance domestic appeal.
Two prime examples of Islamist movements with national agendas and firm anti-al-Qaida policies concern Hizbollah and Hamas. Both organisations emerged in opposition to Israeli occupation policies. While both of them have a history of terrorist tactics, they have joined the political process to advance their national objectives. Turning increasingly into state actors in Lebanon and Gaza, they reject global jihadism and may even go after such groups on their territory. Lumping Islamo-nationalist actors together with al-Qaida fails to do justice to the variety of Islamist movements and their objectives.

Similar to the al-Qaida affiliates, some of the locally-oriented Islamist extremist groups may still attack Western targets within their reach, either for ideological reasons or to draw attention to their local grievances. It was no coincidence, for example, that the Caucasus Emirate, an Islamist militant group fighting Russia’s presence in the Northern Caucasus, chose Moscow’s international airport for its terrorist attack in January 2011 (36 deaths). Other groups refrain from attacking local Western targets, considering such attacks counterproductive for their national agenda. What unites all these groups is that they are not driven by global jihadism, which is why the probability that they attack Western homelands seems rather low.

Beyond its failure to win over most other Islamist extremist organisations, al-Qaida also suffers from waning support among Muslim societies. There is much popular disaffection about al-Qaida’s indiscriminate killings of Muslims. The atrocities against Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere caused tremendous damage to the al-Qaida brand. Furthermore, Bin Laden has not been able to formulate a positive vision that would appeal to the masses. The fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt may contribute further to the loss of appeal of al-Qaida, as it has demonstrated that there is a peaceful alternative to change brought about by jihadist violence. Finally, modifications in US counterterrorism policy also contribute to the decreasing appeal of al-Qaida, though this aspect should not be exaggerated (see below).

**Two types of homegrown terrorists**

Improved counterterrorism efforts have made it more difficult for members of jihadist terrorist organisations to enter Western countries and launch successful attacks. But Western security is also threatened by homegrown Islamist extremist violence. The threat of terror attacks by radicalised Muslims or converts who
TERRORISM AS A MANAGEABLE RISK

fighters with close links to al-Qaida and its affiliates (top-down thesis). Evidence suggests that these are simply two different types of homegrown terrorists. Self-radicalised ‘lone wolf’ jihadists and autonomous terrorist cells are very difficult to discover. They usually lack however the expertise and logistics to launch sophisticated large-scale attacks. Building a bomb and detonating it effectively is more complex than is often assumed.

Conversely, homegrown terrorists who receive training and guidance from terrorist groups in countries like Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia may have the potential to cause large-scale damage upon their return. Numerous European and US citizens have actually travelled to such conflict zones and training camps. Some of them have received lessons in bomb-making techniques, while others have even settled there and taken up operative roles within the organisations. Incidentally, the suicide bombers in the Madrid and London attacks – by far the biggest incidents of Islamist extremist violence in Europe – are now also believed to have had closer ties to al-Qaida than initially assumed. If there have not been any major successful attacks in Europe or the US since, this may partly be because the greater security risks associated with this
second type of homegrown terrorists are offset to some extent by the higher probability of the perpetrators showing up on the intelligence radar. Having said that, the man trying to detonate a bomb in Times Square in May 2010 and the Stockholm suicide bomber of December 2010 are both examples of homegrown terrorists with ties to external jihadists who had remained unnoticed by intelligence agencies.

A largely non-Western threat

The decreasing appeal of global jihad and the limited operational capacity of jihadists willing to strike European or US targets suggest a reduced scale of threat emanating from Islamist extremist violence to Western countries overall. A typical attack in the coming years will likely be of limited scale and sophistication, carried out with conventional weapons like assault rifles or improvised small explosive devices. In its methods, jihadist terrorism increasingly resembles traditional IRA- or ETA-type terrorism. It continues to differ, however, in that it is often aiming at indiscriminate mass casualties and may target any country, irrespective of secessionist conflicts.

It is due to this last reason that Islamist extremist violence will likely remain a major concern to Western publics and policy-makers. It works to the advantage of al-Qaida that even failed attacks arouse public attention, emotion, and fear. It is important to note, however, that it is non-OECD countries, and predominantly

Global distribution of terrorist incidents in 2010*

*Data up to September 2010
Source: US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) 2011
TERRORISM AS A MANAGEABLE RISK

In attacks by anarchist (left-wing) groups in Greece, Italy, and Spain. In the UK, there were 173 terrorism arrests in 2009/10, compared to an annual average of 216 since 2002. As for the US, few would have expected that there would ‘only’ be 14 homeland deaths caused by Islamist extremist violence in the decade post-9/11 – a figure that contrasts with the 168 people killed in the right-wing Oklahoma bombing of 1995.

The bottom line is that while jihadist terrorism hits hard some of the Muslim countries, it is a manageable risk in Western countries. There is of course a price tag attached to managing this risk effectively (see below). Also, new large-scale attacks on Western homelands can never be ruled out. Nevertheless, the likelihood of such an attack appears lower today than some counterterrorist bureaucracies and analysts continue to argue.

This is also why two worst-case scenarios are unlikely today: Links between anti-Western Muslim regimes and global jihadists have not materialised in any substantial way. Iran does support Hizbollah and Hamas, but has been tough on al-Qaeda. Nor did Saddam Hussein cooperate with global jihadists. There are ties between the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries most affected by terrorism in 2010*</th>
<th>Attacks</th>
<th>Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Afghanistan</td>
<td>2,514</td>
<td>2,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Iraq</td>
<td>2,016</td>
<td>2,704</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pakistan</td>
<td>1,032</td>
<td>1,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. India</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Somalia</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>946</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data up to September 2010

Source: US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) 2011

Muslim-majority countries, that suffer the bulk of terrorism attacks and casualties. In 2010, the ‘top five’ countries in terms of both attacks and deaths were Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and Somalia. Collectively, they accounted for 76 per cent of all attacks and 83 per cent of all deaths.

Europe and the US rank last on this global list of terror incidents. In Europe, there have been few attacks, and the figures for arrests have been decreasing since 2006. According to Europol data covering 26 EU member states (excluding the UK), six member states reported 294 failed, foiled, or successfully perpetrated terrorist attacks in 2009. Only one of these attacks was categorised as Islamist, as opposed to 237 attacks related to ETA in Spain and France. In the figures for 2010, the number of Islamist attacks may go up slightly, but the major trend may well be a rise
al-Qaeda and LeT in Pakistan. Yet, these are tactical alliances that are not geared against the West, but must be seen in the context of the ISI’s strategic calculations concerning Pakistan’s relations with India.

Without state sponsorship of global jihadism, the scenario of terrorism based on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) appears unlikely too. Again, there are concerns about the safety of nuclear weapons, especially should Pakistan descend into political chaos. US President Barack Obama’s characterisation of nuclear terrorism as ‘the most extreme threat to global security’ is certainly justified, and there is no doubt that a WMD attack could be a game-changer in international relations. But it is doubtful that Obama is also right in calling this ‘the most immediate threat’. Getting the materials and the know-how to launch an effective WMD attack remains exceedingly difficult. As for the use of conventional explosives to disperse radioactive materials, such ‘dirty bombs’ are unlikely to cause mass casualties, though they may cause mass panic.

More effective tactical counterterrorism

The weakening of the global jihadist threat is linked not only to strategic miscalculations on the part of al-Qaeda. It is also the result of improved tactical counterterrorism. Three fundamentals have been at the heart of counterterrorism since 9/11: strengthened anti-terrorism legislation and expanded law enforcement powers, financial interdiction, and enhanced domestic coordination and international cooperation. On top of these fundamentals, there is a series of lessons learnt that in sum have rendered counterterrorism more effective in recent years.

These lessons concern a modified conceptual counterterrorism framework, a shift from ‘hammer’ to ‘scalpel’ military measures, and a more comprehensive approach including non-military measures.

Changes in counterterrorism policy concern mainly the US. The Europeans reacted to 9/11 with an evolution rather than revolution in counterterrorism policies. Confronted with domestic terrorism since the 1970s, they have continued to view Islamist extremist violence essentially as a law enforcement challenge. Accordingly, they focused on expanding intelligence and law enforcement powers and capabilities and made efforts to improve judicial, police, and intelligence cooperation. In the US,
by contrast, the Bush administration interpreted 9/11 as a new reality that required new approaches and provided for new opportunities, the result being a revolution in US foreign policy, a strong emphasis on military counterterrorism, and a series of legal measures that aroused much controversy. It was only towards the end of the Bush period that the US began to adapt and refine its policies, some of which had actually proven counterproductive in meeting the terrorism challenge. The Obama administration has enhanced the scale and speed of change in US counterterrorism, implementing lessons learnt since 9/11.

Three fundamentals
Efforts to strengthen national counterterrorism legal frameworks and expand intelligence and law enforcement powers have been a fundamental component in the fight against terrorism of most Western countries since 9/11. While measures differ widely in scale, they usually include enhanced powers for the surveillance of communications, the observation of private spaces, and the secret screening of databases. Such a strengthening of preventive investigatory powers reflects a broader shift from a crime-resolving to a preventive logic in terrorism-related law enforcement, with, for instance, preparatory actions for terrorism being criminalised. In some countries, intelligence agencies have taken over law enforcement tasks traditionally performed by the police. In addition to the expansion of powers, many governments have significantly increased resources and capabilities for intelligence and law enforcement institutions. US intelligence funding has doubled since 9/11.

There is an ongoing debate in Western liberal democracies as to the right balance between security and civil rights considerations in the fight against terrorism. Legal measures to detect and go after terrorists inevitably infringe upon the privacy rights of citizens. From a counterterrorism perspective, enhanced intelligence and law enforcement powers play a vital role in keeping the rate of successful attacks in Europe and the US low. Ultimately, however, each country will mark its own delineation between national security and individual freedoms, as well as between intelligence and police competences, depending on its political culture and other domestic factors in play.

Cutting off the flow of money to terrorist organisations has been a second fundamental of counterterrorism that has proven effective. Under the leadership of the UN and the US Treasury Department’s
Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, the vast majority of states have taken action to improve anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing laws. Although terrorist funding emanating from countries like Saudi Arabia continues to be a major concern, the overall balance sheet of these measures is positive.

Domestically, numerous coordinative bodies have been set up, such as the National Counterterrorism Center in the US, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre in the UK, or the Gemeinsame Terrorismusabwehrzentrum in Germany. Some countries have also chosen integrative rather than coordinative models, with Switzerland for instance fusing its external and domestic intelligence agencies.

International cooperation has increased too, in line with the recognition that terrorism is a transnational threat that can only be met with a collective response. Cooperation still takes place mainly on the bilateral level, with the CIA being a clearing-house for information-sharing with both Western and Muslim countries. But there is also a growing degree of multilateral cooperation in counterterrorism, not just among the Europeans and between the EU and the US, but also in the framework of the UN and at the level of non-Western regional organisations.

Intelligence cooperation is still less developed than police cooperation, due to the sensitivity of the materials involved and the need to protect sources. Often, the material exchanged...
consists of broad analyses of terrorism trends rather than operationally valuable information. Moreover, seen from the US, intelligence cooperation with Europe often looks as a one-way street, as most European agencies know much about their homegrown scene, but are struggling to track developments of the global jihadist threat. Still, had it not been for the enhanced exchanges of intelligence, far fewer attacks may have been foiled since 9/11.

A modified US framework
As for the recent lessons learnt in fighting terrorism, a major change concerns the US conceptual approach to counterterrorism, which has become more focused and more nuanced. Washington has moved away from the so-called ‘Global War on Terror’ as an overarching framework dominating US foreign policy. In the official terrorism narrative of the US government, there has been a shift from ‘war on terror’ to ‘war on al-Qaida and its affiliates’. The idea behind this shift is to disaggregate the threat and underline that terrorist organisations, rather than Muslim countries or Islam per se, are the objectives of US counterterrorism. Also in this context, the US now defines the threat as ‘violent extremism’ rather than ‘radical Islam’.

In speeches in Cairo and elsewhere, President Obama has stressed the common interests of the US and the Muslim world, in combating terrorism and beyond. Arguing that the US had gone off course in its immediate response to 9/11, he emphasised the importance of preserving the rule of law in counterterrorism and banned the use of those CIA interrogation methods widely considered torture. To be sure, the changes in the legal framework of US counterterrorism have been much more limited than many had anticipated. The Obama administration continues to apply the rule of war paradigm in its fight against global jihadism and has not abandoned practices such as indefinite detention without trial, targeted killings, rendition, and trial by military commissions. Also, Obama has failed to live up to his promise of closing the US detention facility in Guantanamo.

Still, the conceptual modifications have been substantial enough to reduce international criticism of US counterterrorism policies. Although the US image stays weak in many Muslim countries, these modifications have likely contributed to the global decline of al-Qaida’s popularity.

Military scalpel
As regards the role of the military in counterterrorism, the case of
Afghanistan illustrates its limits in resolving the root causes of terrorism and stabilising fragile countries. Yet, the crisis at the Hindu Kush also demonstrates that some military measures can be quite effective in managing the terrorist threat. This has much to do with a shift from hammer to scalpel military tactics.

There are two dimensions of this shift. First, there is now a strong focus on targeted military operations and killings of al-Qaida leaders by US special operations forces and, above all, the CIA-led drone programme. The use of unmanned drones to kill militants in the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan is increasingly perceived as a key element of counterterrorism. Reducing the need for high-risk military interventions in terrain that is difficult to access for political or topographical reasons, the covert CIA programme has proven an effective tactical tool to diminish al-Qaida’s elite and disperse the organisation. There have been negative side effects in that civilian casualties of drone attacks have driven tribesmen into militancy. But such effects have decreased as attacks have become more precise due to improved cooperation with the Pakistani intelligence services, better targeting, and the use of smaller missiles. The few polls available suggest a surprising degree of local support for drone attacks in the tribal areas.

The extent to which drone-based counterterrorism is applicable elsewhere remains disputed. Much will depend on local conditions. In the case of Yemen, the US has been reluctant to rely on drone attacks so far, following warnings that actionable intelligence and local cooperation...
tion are insufficient to avoid negative repercussions. Overall, however, drones are set to become an ever more important tool in US counterterrorism policy.

Second, the US is increasingly focusing on building local security and counterterrorism capacity by providing equipment, training, and other forms of security assistance. While the number of US special operations forces has been increased to that end, local capacity-building is also becoming a priority for the armed forces as a whole. It is now a major issue in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and North Africa. Local resistance to US counterterrorism activities, the fear of provoking national-oriented terrorist groups into global jihad as a result of US military action, US domestic fatigue about military intervention, and financial pressure on defence budgets are all prompting a growing reliance on local security actors for counterterrorism. This development also makes sense when considering the success of Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Indonesia in reducing the domestic jihadist threat. Having said that, the empowerment of local security forces often does not go together with enhanced legitimacy, which raises larger questions concerning strategic counterterrorism (see below).

Beyond military measures
In addition to refining military measures, there is a trend towards more non-military assistance in counterterrorism. Some analysts continue to dismiss the role of economic opportunity, arguing that terrorism is driven by politics rather than poverty. Others have long made the case for linking counterterrorism more closely with development to improve its effectiveness. The Obama administration is leaning towards this latter view. While keeping military counterterrorism funding high, it has increased complementary civilian assistance markedly.

In Pakistan, economic-related US aid has tripled since 2009. While it constituted less than one third of all US aid between 2002 and 2010, it is expected to be close to half in 2011, amounting to US$1,565 bn compared to US$1,665 bn in security-related funding. A major objective is to foster development in the tribal regions to counter the rise of extremism and provide for alternative livelihood opportunities. In the case of Yemen, there has been a substantial increase of aid as well. US assistance to Yemen is expected to amount to approximately US$300 mn in 2011, about half of which is earmarked for non-military purposes. Yemen’s economic development is also high on the agenda of the
Friends of Yemen, a group established in 2010 that brings together representatives from 20 Arab and Western states as well as international organisations.

In parallel to widening the approach of dealing with terrorist organisations in conflict regions, there are also efforts to complement intelligence and law enforcement activities with broader measures to prevent or counter homegrown radicalisation. National approaches vary and range from integration and job-finding programmes to measures specifically targeted at delegitimising al-Qaida and global jihadism. In this latter context, there is an ongoing debate about the role of radical but non-violent Islamist organisations in preventing violent radicalisation. Whereas some countries view them as a potential safety valve against the jihadist doctrine and terrorism and seek to engage with them, others argue that they nourish Islamist parallel societies and may become a conveyor belt for jihadist groups.

The specific extent to which more comprehensive approaches or indeed any of the other trends in counterterrorism discussed here have contributed to the decrease of the jihadist threat to Western security is impossible to quantify. The net effect of current counterterrorism efforts is positive, however, to the extent that it seems justified to describe the threat as a manageable risk. Managing this threat will continue to require considerable resources, although the overall costs will lower significantly once US expenditure for operations in Afghanistan decreases.

**Challenges of strategic counterterrorism**

There are those who make the case for moving beyond containing terrorism and investing much more in changing the threat environment and tackling the underlying political and economic conditions that provide a fertile ground for Islamist extremist violence. There is certainly much legitimacy to this argument, and some of the lessons learnt in counterterrorism point in this direction. Yet, excessive expectations for strategic counterterrorism should be avoided, as the challenges involved are formidable. Managing the problem of jihadist terrorism seems a much more realistic scenario than resolving it.

**How to deal with weak states is an unresolved question**

Evidence suggests that weak states provide an important home base for jihadist terrorist organisations. Their inability or unwillingness to secure
their territory provides safe havens for such groupings. Their failure to deliver essential services increases the potential for radicalisation. How to deal with weak states is an unresolved question. Western-driven state-building is in crisis. Stabilising states by creating effective local governance and security capacity has proven a complex, time-consuming, controversial, and in many cases unsuccessful endeavour.

Afghanistan is a prime example. With comprehensive nation-building objectives long abandoned, the US-led coalition is now pursuing a coun-

---

### Obama’s budget request for fiscal year 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selected items concerning major counterterrorism funding schemes and actors</th>
<th>US$ bn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overseas Contingency Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq</strong></td>
<td>126.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Department of Defense contribution</em></td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Department of State contribution</em></td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeland security</strong></td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. Department of Homeland Security</em></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. Department of Defense</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. Department of Health</em></td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. Department of Justice</em></td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department of Defense (base budget)</strong></td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. security sector assistance in Iraq and Afghanistan</em></td>
<td>not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. global CT ‘train and equip’ assistance programmes</em></td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department of State and USAID (base budget)</strong></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. partnership programmes with Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan</em></td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. anti-terrorism, non-proliferation, demining</em></td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. foreign military finances</em></td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>incl. development assistance</em></td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CIA and other civilian intelligence agencies</strong></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: White House 2011*
terinsurgency strategy to achieve the counterterrorism objective of defeating al-Qaida. The main pillars of the strategy are to protect the population, sufficiently weaken the Taliban to push them into political reconciliation, and strengthen local security capacity to allow for the withdrawal of the currently almost 150,000 international troops. Yet, time is on the side of the Taliban. Ten years after the military intervention in Afghanistan, it is less certain than ever that the country will be able to provide for its security post-ISAF. A long-term light-footprint counterterrorism strategy may well be inevitable to make sure that al-Qaida will not be able to operate from Afghanistan again.

In Pakistan, going beyond managing the terrorism threat will hardly be feasible either. While there are elements in the Pakistani government willing to accommodate US counterterrorism concerns to some extent today, the military is still very selective in terms of the militant groups it fights as it seeks to preserve its relations with the Afghan Taliban to counter Indian influence in post-ISAF Afghanistan. Washington has little choice but to continue the strategy of supporting and pressuring Pakistan and relying on drones to deal with the terrorist threat emanating from the tribal areas. Drones cannot provide for a long-term solution, but they are the best tactical means available for muddling through.

Working with authoritarian regimes

The recent focus on ‘state-building light’ concepts, stressing local security capacity without larger democracy and rule of law considerations, is often criticised for producing short-term tactical counterterrorism gains but long-term strategic drawbacks. For instance, there are indications that part of the enhanced US counterterrorism assistance to Yemen has been diverted by the regime of President Saleh to intensify its policy of repression against domestic rebellions in the north and the south. The net effect of strengthening such a regime may well be growing popular dissatisfaction with the government and could play into the hands of AQAP.

Yemen illustrates a general dilemma of the West: Narrow counterterrorism concerns have prompted the US and the Europeans to intensify cooperation with the security apparatus of many authoritarian regimes after 9/11. Putting stability over democracy, there was little pressure for political and economic reform in the past years. The reasoning was that while fully democratic societies would likely be long-term anchors of stability, the process of democratisation
could be marked by increased short-term instability. Moreover, with Islamist movements being the main organised opposition group in many Arab countries, there have been concerns that elections would bring to power regimes more critical of the West.

The mass protests spreading across the Arab world in 2011 have been a forceful reminder that illegitimate government can become a source of instability itself. With bottom-up pressure for change mounting, embarrassed Western countries are gradually advocating democratic change again – at least as far as developments in North Africa are concerned. The fall of authoritarian regimes may yet become a major asset for strategic counterterrorism, removing an important source of radicalisation and anti-Western sentiment. But for all the political opportunities, Western governments remain deeply worried. It is not just growing migration and a spike in oil prices that concerns them, but also the prospect of less intensive counterterrorism cooperation with some of the new governments – as well as the scenario of new jihadist safe havens emerging as a result of domestic turmoil and growing state weakness.

Anti-Islam sentiments
A third challenge of strategic counterterrorism concerns the rise of anti-Islam sentiment, especially in Europe. Anti-Muslim slogans and warnings of an ‘Islamisation’ of Europe by right-wing populist parties are reverberating in growing parts of society in some European countries. Immigration and integration issues are increasingly framed in anti-Islam terms. Identity crises related to globalisation, rising unemployment, and the growing number of Muslims in many Western countries have all contributed to what some call ‘Islamophobia’. Terrorism likely plays a key role, however, with the ongoing threat of jihadist attacks planting seeds of distrust.

It is ironic that anti-Muslim sentiment is rising in Europe at the same time that the US tries hard to reduce anti-Americanism in the Muslim world. Measures such as banning burqas and minarets and declaring multiculturalism dead may increase the risk of alienation and radicalisation of Muslims in Europe. They may also negatively affect relations with Muslim countries, particularly as far as intelligence and security cooperation is concerned.

Putting terrorism and counterterrorism into perspective
All these challenges of strategic counterterrorism suggest that the war against al-Qaida is not a struggle that can be won. But the important message to convey is that global
jihadism is a risk the West can manage. Ten years after 9/11, the terrorist threat in the West remains real but limited. Counterterrorism works to the extent that the probability of mass-scale damage has decreased. Measures to prevent attacks will obviously have to continue. Equally important, however, will be efforts to strengthen the resilience capability of societies and infrastructures to mitigate the consequences of future attacks and avoid political overreaction. Fostering a culture of resilience seems the more urgent since challenges other than terrorism will likely dominate the international security agenda in the years ahead.
STRATEGIC TRENDS offers a concise annual analysis of major developments in world affairs, with a primary focus on international security. Providing succinct interpretations of key trends rather than a comprehensive survey of events, this publication will appeal to analysts, policy-makers, academics, the media, and the interested public alike. It is produced by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. Strategic Trends is available both as an e-publication (www.sta.ethz.ch) and as a paperback.

STRATEGIC TRENDS 2011 is the second issue of the Strategic Trends series. It contains a brief overview as well as chapters on emerging markets and fractured geopolitics, changing regional dynamics in the Middle East, terrorism and counterterrorism ten years after 9/11, and narcotics as a growing security concern.

The Center for Security Studies (www.css.ethz.ch) at ETH Zurich specialises in research, teaching, and the provision of electronic services in international and Swiss security policy. An academic institute with a major think-tank capacity, it has a wide network of partners.