

Terrorists are sub-state or non-state actors targeting non-combatants with violence, the threat of violence, or sabotage to inspire fear to advance a political, social, or ideological agenda. These threats encompass system disruptions (cyber, economic, physical, financial) and physical violence (WMDs, bombings, aircraft hijacking, kidnapping). Terrorists are rational actors that react to threats. Their motivations are different from ours but must be considered to formulate a multifaceted and flexible counter-terrorist strategy. Problems with current counter-terrorist efforts center around a singular approach to the threat of terrorism with unrealistic criteria for measuring “victory”, a knowledge gap on the part of counter-terrorist strategists, and a capacity gap in failed or developing states. This will require sustaining public commitment (long term, political, and financial), and a multilateral approach that is highly coordinated among civil society, NGOs, governments, militaries, and IGOs. Terrorism is a tactic, and cannot be completely defeated. The goal of the United States must be to reduce the threat.

When beginning to examine the goals of an effective counter-terrorism strategy for America, the objectives of the US fall under the overarching goal of protecting the United States and US interests from future attacks. Beyond that, specific sub-goals fall under either the short term or the long term. In the short term, the United States needs to distinguish, understand and effectively evaluate terrorist threats. A second goal, which stretches between both the short and the long term, is improving US intelligence. In the long term, the United States needs to focus on improving the US world image and moral leadership. Additionally, America needs to improve their strategic communication, both domestically and internationally in the sectors of operational and public dissemination. Finally, the US needs to continue to seek stability in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to eliminate what have become breeding grounds for potential terrorists.

Achieving these goals requires the development of both a methodology and strategy for both at home and abroad. There are a number of dimensions within the domestic and foreign sphere requiring attention. Domestic counter-terrorism measures will prepare Americans to better deal with an attack, and increase our effectiveness in evaluating and prioritizing the threats. Some areas require re-evaluation to increase efficiency and effectiveness, as well as, accommodate for the fluidity and ever changing nature of terrorism. Some of these areas include border security, immigration control, and port security. The improvement of our current emergency response protocol is also necessary in handling terrorism. An emergency response protocol is essential to ensure the country can survive future attacks with minimal casualties and panic. The federal government will provide guidelines that allow states to create individualized response plans that will accommodate for regional and environmental differences and conditions. In the case of a terrorist attack, measures should be made to ensure a fast and sufficient response. As part of this, medical supplies to deal with chemical and biological attacks should be increased and readily available throughout the country. Intelligence reform will also be integral in creating an effective counter-terrorism strategy. Within the intelligence community, continuity and uniformity should be established for coding and the classification of information. Furthermore, a mechanism should be created to facilitate and improve the sharing of information between the agencies. If the US decides not to try terrorists in international courts, but instead within American military or civil courts, the terrorists should be afforded the same judicial rights as all U.S. citizens.

Finally, the implementation of cultural education will improve the awareness and knowledge of differing societies and ideologies.

Combating terrorism abroad depends on both reaction and preemption. The US must respond to existing and active terrorist threats, such as Al Qaeda, with military action. When possible this kinetic action should take the form of special operations, which leave a smaller footprint than more conventional actions such as the invasion of Iraq. This smaller footprint will reduce both the financial and personal cost, as well as the negative effects on world opinion of large scale operations (which more recruit more terrorists). The US should also pursue military operations against terrorist bases of financial support, such as drug operations. In all these efforts, international cooperation is essential. The US should avoid unilateral action whenever possible, as international allies can share the burden and increase America's perceived legitimacy.

The goal of preemption is to stop future attacks by reducing the terrorists ability to operate, and there are many measures to achieve this. No safe haven should be afforded to terrorists, for example such as Afghanistan that support or harbor terrorist organizations. To reduce the incentive for people in developing countries to resort to terrorism, the US should foster stability in infrastructure and civilian institutions. So the military is not overwhelmed with tasks it is neither trained nor resourced for, civilian agencies should spearhead state building measures while the military focuses on providing security. This security will allow state-building agencies to strengthen government, foster education and business enterprise, and provide civil services and basic humanitarian needs. A concurrent information operation will hopefully weaken terrorists moral base of support. These operations include a broadened media effort that gives a voice for moderate Muslims in the Arab world, and highlights the successes in Iraq and Afghanistan.