

## **Al Qaeda as Warfighting Entity**

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In recent weeks, we have been trying to analyze the state of the U.S.-jihadist war, touching on subjects ranging from the decision -- announced this past week -- to begin reducing U.S. troops in Iraq to the idea that we are in the midst of a surge of jihadist attacks, intended to reshape the course of the war.

As often happens, our readers -- mostly non-subscribers, we would note -- have lambasted us. Critics of the war have accused us of pimping for the Bush administration for daring to imply that the war was anything but a total and catastrophic failure. Supporters of the war wrote to condemn us for even imagining that al Qaeda might consist of people who actually think and plan things, rather than of raving psychotics seeking slaughter because they feel like it. One e-mail said the war is the result of George W. Bush's unresolved Oedipal conflicts. Another said that we were naïve in assuming that all Muslims were not deranged killers. Discussions of the war have never been elevated, but they have now degenerated to a Warner Brother's cartoon -- with Sylvester, Tweety, Elmer and Bugs all cranked up on speed and self-righteousness.

In the midst of this cartoon-like mayhem, one group of quite serious e-mails caught our attention and seemed to require serious consideration.

Stratfor has been treating both Iraq and the global U.S.-jihadist conflict as a war, understandable by the rules of warfare. We have treated this as an asymmetric war in which two sides, using very different methods, have engaged in a global duel. If this is so, then looking to previous wars will provide us with guidance. As an example, we spoke last week of the current offensive as similar to the Battle of the Bulge and Tet -- one unsuccessful and one successful military gambit to reverse an unacceptable course of events.

A series of thoughtful e-mails arrived, arguing that in thinking in terms of conventional warfare -- and these readers regard even the unconventional warfare of Vietnam as ultimately conventional -- we are fundamentally missing the point about what is happening. The United States may be engaging in warfare, but the jihadists are not. As one writer put it, al Qaeda is engaged in a kind of theater and is indifferent to the outcome in any practical sense. Creating terror is an end in itself. Therefore, so long as it can continue to inflict terror at some level and with some randomness, it will be satisfied.

Put simply, this argument goes, al Qaeda does not think of itself as being in a war but in a permanent confrontation with Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism. This is not warfare properly understood because it is not politics properly understood. Moreover, another stream went, terrorism is not a warfighting strategy but a psychological one. Yet others argued that al Qaeda is not sufficiently coherent as an organization to be engaged in warfighting and that what the United States faces is not a military force but a social movement.

These are good, thoughtful arguments that have some merit. Ultimately, however, we think them to be in error.

Karl von Clausewitz wrote that war is the continuation of politics by other means. In order for the United States to be engaged in a war with al Qaeda, three things seem to be necessary.

1. Al Qaeda must be an entity that is capable of making and enforcing decisions. There can be no war without strategy and tactics, and no strategy and tactics without a command structure.
2. Al Qaeda must have political goals that are in some sense practical. Punishing the infidel is

not a political goal: It is not intended to achieve a political outcome, nor is it intended to create or influence regimes.

3. Al Qaeda must have a warfighting strategy that it is pursuing. Its actions must fit into the paradigm of war and make sense from a military standpoint.

In our view, all three of these criteria are met. This does not mean that al Qaeda will or won't be successful; it simply means that al Qaeda's behavior can be properly understood in terms of war.

First, it is true that al Qaeda is not a nation. The history of warfare is replete with sub-national groups that have waged wars on the way to becoming nations or to taking over a state. What is interesting about al Qaeda is that it is not a sub-national grouping but a trans-national grouping. Its goals do not involve any one country, but a range of countries. What comes to mind is the First and Second Communist International, before the Bolshevik Revolution captured revolutionary communism for the Soviet state.

In the end, however, the issue is less whether there is historical precedent for al Qaeda than whether there is a decision-making structure that can guide combatants through the war. There certainly was one on Sept. 11, 2001. At this point, that structure appears to be frayed. But if it is frayed, that is not due to the nature of al Qaeda but rather to the reversals it has suffered. In addition, decision-making must be appropriate to a particular battlefield. Whereas the United States may require a highly technical command, control and communication system to manage its assets on the battlefield, al Qaeda commands sparse forces on a global basis in an intensely hostile environment.

The very process of command, control and communication represents the Achilles' heel of their system. More precisely, the enemy -- the United States -- owns the electromagnetic spectrum. Communications through that domain will lead to detection and destruction. This leaves al Qaeda's primary path of communication as the movement of humans from one point to another to deliver messages. Command and control is dramatically slowed by communications. By necessity, operational and tactical control devolve to forces in the field. The situation on the global battlefield requires that al Qaeda provide only general guidance. That does not prevent the waging of a global offensive, planned in general with sufficient time for couriers to arrive with instructions. Al Qaeda is a warfighting system -- but one that, of necessity, operates by different rules than others. Al Qaeda has a command structure and does wage war.

Al Qaeda also has political goals. Indeed, it differs from prior groups that used terror tactics by the fact that it embarked on the war with political goals. The long-term goal -- creating a caliphate encompassing all the lands it deems to be part of the dominion of Islam -- was not the immediate goal. Rather, al Qaeda's immediate goal was to increase the effective Islamist opposition to existing Muslim regimes to force at least one successful uprising. The means toward that end were two-fold: First, to demonstrate in the Muslim world the vulnerability of the United States -- the patron of many of these existing regimes -- and second, to force a response from the United States that would increase either contempt or effective hostility among Muslims. If the United States refused combat, this would be a sign that it was a paper tiger. If it surged into the Islamic world, this would prove the United States was the enemy. Either way, al Qaeda thought it would win.

This perspective differs wildly from that of terrorist groups of the 1970s and 1980s. Consider groups such as the Bader-Meinhof gang in Germany, the Weather Underground in the United States or even Black September. The first two couldn't state a coherent political program, let alone correlate their actions with that program. Black September had a goal -- the creation of a Palestinian state -- but there was no clear connection between any of its actions and that goal. Killing Israeli athletes in Munich was theater.

Al Qaeda had a very clear goal and, from many perspectives, it was not a preposterous goal. It wanted governments like that in Egypt to fall in an Islamist uprising. It felt that the submerged sentiment in these countries favored Islamism, and that -- depending on the behavior of the United States -- risings were achievable. Al Qaeda might have been wrong, and an element of psychological warfare was present, but in the end, the attacks on Sept. 11 and afterward were carefully connected with a political goal.

If they made an error, it was only in assuming that genuine anti-Americanism and hatred of local regimes supported by the United States would translate into effective anti-Americanism that could be leveraged to al Qaeda's advantage. Public sentiment matters in democratic regimes; it doesn't matter in warfare very much. Consider: Most of Europe hated the Germans and their occupation during World War II. Anti-German feeling was overwhelming. Nevertheless, this did not translate into effective anti-German sentiment. European states were never in a position to overthrow German power. That required an external intervention. In Vietnam, on the other hand, anti-Americanism proved effective: It turned into a warfighting process.

Where al Qaeda miscalculated was in assuming that sentiment would turn into effective sentiment. Thus far, except in four Sunni provinces in Iraq, that hasn't happened. But that it didn't happen was neither pre-ordained nor obvious. Al Qaeda knew what it was doing.

Finally, al Qaeda used a reasonable method of warfighting to achieve its aims. Given its intention -- to strike the United States and other countries -- and its resources, its only option was to conduct counterpopulation operations. Allied bombing of Germany and Japan and the German bombing of London constituted counterpopulation attacks. The goal was to drive a wedge between the state and population, or cause a social breakdown, through mass bombings designed to inflict hardship and generate terror among the civilian populace.

Al Qaeda's use of terror attacks suited its strategic goals. The organization intended to destabilize the target country, forcing it into military actions that would bring the desirable result. Given al Qaeda's resources and expertise in covert operations, it had few options other than pursuing terror attacks.

At this point, al Qaeda is losing the war from the standpoint of its own strategic goals. No Muslim regime has fallen since Sept. 11, save two -- Afghanistan and Iraq -- that fell to the United States. The Iraqi resistance showed extreme promise for a very long time, given American miscalculations. Anti-Americanism had turned effective. However, the shifting calculus among the Sunni elders has threatened to undermine support for al Qaeda's man in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and the Sunni nationalist insurgency -- onto which al Qaeda has clamped parasitically -- has been in danger of disruption. This, coupled with serious breaches in al Qaeda's global system, forced the group into a desperate counteroffensive.

The counteroffensive could be only loosely organized, given the difficulties in command, control and communication. Moreover, the resources available were local supporters in places such as London who lacked the key skills needed for strategic operations -- operations on the order of Sept. 11. The counteroffensive may not be over, but thus far the attacks appear to be politically ineffective. There has been no shift in the basic trends. The center of gravity of the situation now is in Iraq, among the Sunnis. As the Sunnis go, so goes the war in Iraq. As the war in Iraq goes, so goes the general war in the Muslim world. The trend favors the United States, but al Qaeda is attempting to reverse that trend.

In short, al Qaeda is very much a warfighting entity. It adheres to the general rules of warfare and therefore can be understood and, to a limited extent, predicted, on the basis of its political program and resources. The outcome of the war is still uncertain, and the level of violence is not a measure of anyone's warfighting capability unless you know their resources. In warfare, the most intense fighting frequently occurs prior to collapse. If the Sunnis in Iraq switch sides -- which is one of the things U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently visited Iraq

to try to arrange -- al Qaeda's back will be against the wall. The violence will not end, but its significance will decline.

We therefore feel that we can, in fact, understand the U.S.-al Qaeda war in relatively conventional ways, so long as we adjust for the asymmetric nature of the conflict. In the end, war is simply politics by other means. The United States has its means, and so does al Qaeda. But it is still war.