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The Evolving Terrorist Threat: Implications for Global Security

Part 3: The War Against al Qa'ida and ISIS: A Net Assessment

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Take-Aways

- By completing the devastating September 11, 2001, attacks and then continuing to innovate its strategies, al-Qaeda won “round one” of the war on terrorism.
- “Round two” went to the United States, which killed Osama bin-Laden in 2011 and decimated al-Qaeda.
- Al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS won “round three” by spreading to new territories and, in the case of ISIS, ousting al-Qaeda as leader of global jihadists.
- Now that ISIS is losing ground, the United States and its allies could take “round four,” though the victory won’t end the war. The US military must keep applying “relentless pressure” via repeated strikes.
- Though the United States has struggled to turn successful operations into enduring gain, few alternatives exist for containing terrorism so the Middle East can stabilize.

Recommendation

The George W. Bush administration set lofty goals after September 11, 2001: Iraq would become a thriving democracy, and the United States and its allies would end jihadi terrorism. Alas, the next 16 years proved that dreams of Middle Eastern peace and democracy were far-fetched. The Middle East will never be tranquil, former US defense official Michael G. Vickers flatly says in this lecture and the subsequent interview with RAND Corporation senior vice president Andrew Hoehn. The best hope is to contain the terror threat to allow the region to stabilize – but even that reduced goal will require constant vigilance, Vickers posits. *getAbstract* recommends this speech to policy makers and global investors seeking insight into the chaos in the Middle East.

Summary

The war on terror, which began in 2001, has shown dramatic turns of fortune. The momentum shifted notably as al-Qaeda, the US and ISIS have experimented with various strategies. Al-Qaeda won “round one” of the war, a five-year period. The terrorist group completed the devastating September 11, 2001, attacks, revealing weaknesses in the previous US strategies of containment and one-time strikes. After executing the strikes on US soil, al-Qaeda absorbed the US counterattack and continued to innovate. The US response was ambitious: The George W. Bush administration aimed to turn Iraq into a model democracy. However, a dearth of troops and intel weakened the campaign.

“Our most grandiose objectives of eliminating the scourge of global jihadism and terrorism more broadly and transforming the broader Middle East are nowhere close to being realized and never will be.”

By 2008, the United States had seized momentum. Continued force against al-Qaeda bore fruit as the United States began to score victories that included killing many al-Qaeda leaders. By 2010, al-Qaeda was just 10% of its former strength. In 2011, US troops killed Osama bin-Laden, which helped make that year the “high-water mark” of US counterterrorism efforts. Thus, “round two” of the global war on terror went to the United States and its allies.

“The societal conditions and the asymmetric competition that have given rise to this war have not only not fundamentally changed; they’re in fact getting worse.”

Yet in “a sobering lesson,” decimating al-Qaeda didn’t end global jihad. The Arab Spring broadened al-Qaeda’s battlefield. In recent years, insurgencies have gained strength and moved into new areas, including Africa, the Indian subcontinent and Yemen. And Islamic State replaced al-Qaeda as leader of global jihad. ISIS has innovated the use of social media to spread its message and recruit. “Round three” went to ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates.

“Sectarian conflict, sharpening religious identity, vulnerable populations in ungoverned spaces and advances in technology will continue to create strategic opportunity for the global jihadist brand.”

Now that ISIS is on the run, “round four” could go to the United States – but the victory won’t end jihadist terrorism. The United States must keep applying “relentless pressure” via repeated strikes. Though the United States has struggled to transform successful operations into enduring gain, few alternatives exist for containing terrorism so the Middle East can stabilize. Complicating matters, the United States faces strategic challenges from China and Russia while pursuing the long-term goal of a stable Middle East.

About the Speaker

Michael G. Vickers, PhD, is the former US undersecretary of defense for intelligence and the former assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict.



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