

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is the War on Terror Over?

Near the end of May, President Obama delivered an important address at the National Defense University in which he declared that the war on terror is nearly over and it is time to shift our national thinking about terror. Among other things, he described al Qaeda as “a shell of its former self.” With the Afghan War winding down and with the Iraq War over, as a nation we “must discipline our thinking and our actions” and no longer give “presidents unbound power more suited for traditional armed conflicts between nation states.” In examining his words carefully, one concludes that he was arguing that, since the terrorists are a minor threat and rather disorganized, it is time to shift our thinking about terror. Many have compared the US War on Terror with the Cold War, which lasted more than 40 years. The US War on Terror officially began in 2001, so it is now about 12 years old. Thus, is it premature to diminish the terrorist threat and, in effect, declare that the War on Terror is nearly over or at least that terror is a much less significant threat to the US?

- First of all, it seems that the al Qaeda threat is not diminished at all. It has changed its form and its dynamic, but is hardly ineffectual and so disparate that it is of no threat to the US. The Administration discounts the threat of Somalia’s al Shabaab or al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. But for how long? The *Wall Street Journal* editorializes that “The older Yemen affiliate turned into a more imminent threat than bin Laden in Pakistan. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula sent the Christmas 2009 ‘underwear bomber.’ Everywhere it is active al Qaeda seeks a sanctuary to plot the overthrow of pro-Western governments and attacks on the US.” As the *Journal* reports, Fred Kagan and Katie Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute’s Critical Threats Project have tracked al Qaeda’s various franchises. They have identified five full-fledged affiliates. Al Shabaab in Somalia was recently blessed by al Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Boko Haram is leading the fight for an Islamic Nigeria, and the leaders of Boko Haram were in contact with bin Laden the last 18 months of his life, according to the documents found at his compound by American special-ops troops. With the collapse of Libya, arms and weapons have flowed into al Qaeda in the Maghreb, which took the opportunity to attempt to seize control of Mali, an important West African nation. Unless the French government would not have intervened, they would have seized Bamako, the capital. The French pushed them into the north of Mali but did not destroy them. The Yemeni branch of al Qaeda is active in Egypt and al Qaeda in Iraq killed more civilians in Iraq last year than they did in 2011. Finally, in Syria, Jabhat al Nursa is indisputably an al Qaeda affiliate. Under President Obama, the US has disengaged from the Middle East and growing instability and al Qaeda’s resurgence are certainly results we can document from that withdrawal.

- Second, the continent of Africa is emerging as a place where Islamic extremism and terrorist threats are growing. Northern Nigeria is basically under the control of the al Qaeda affiliate Boko Haram, which has killed more than a thousand people. Mauritania's security forces have had to deal with jihadist kidnappings. Cote d'Ivoire is emerging as a hotbed of conflict between Muslims and Christians. In addition to Mali (see above), there are radical Muslim/al Qaeda organizations in Niger, Chad, Sudan and South Sudan. All of these nations are extremely poor and, for the most part, have weak governments—a wonderful breeding ground for al Qaeda extremism and possible operational bases. The heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and even perhaps shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles from Libya are appearing in various parts of Saharan Africa and the Sahel. There is not only political instability in these parts of Africa; there is also an intense and often deadly conflict between Muslim extremists and Christians. In fact, one could say that in the northern half of Africa there is a battle for the heart and soul of this region—and that means a battle between Islam and Christianity. Should al Qaeda succeed in establishing significant bases of operations in Africa, the threat to America would be real and significant. Terrorist threats emanating from Africa are a real possibility and, as a nation, we cannot ignore that reality.
- Finally, it is important to return to Syria. As last week's *Issues in Perspective* made clear, the civil war in Syria is a global proxy war, which is central to the strategic vision of Iran and Russia. Hence, President Obama's disengagement from this region is a serious mistake. Indeed, Iran is emerging as the biggest victor in this larger regional struggle. Liz Sly of the *Washington Post* recently reported that "the regional balance of power appears to be tilting in favor of Tehran, with potentially profound implications for a Middle East still grappling with the upheaval wrought by the Arab Spring revolts . . . The ramifications extend far beyond the borders of Syria, whose location at the heart of the Middle East puts it astride most of the region's fault lines, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the disputes left over from the US occupation of Iraq, from the perennial sectarian tensions in Lebanon to Turkey's aspirations to restore its Ottoman-era reach into the Arab world." In fact, Syria is the key to Iran's goal of establishing a crescent of Shiite Islam in the Middle East, stretching from the Persian Gulf deep into Lebanon. As Hezbollah entered the Syrian civil war recently, it affirmed Iran's goal and that it is a part of that vision. For that reason, the fall of Qusair about two weeks ago is a powerful symbol that the Syrian civil war is indeed a proxy war for regional influence—and that Iran is winning that proxy war. Finally, President Obama has made a decision to act!

After over two years of fighting, with over 93,000 deaths, and with compelling evidence that Assad has used chemical weapons on his own people, the president has agreed to provide small arms, ammunition and possibly antitank weapons to the Syrian rebels. Most analysts agree that this is but a token commitment, which will make little difference. Understandably, Obama fears another military quagmire, but he cannot ignore the overwhelming need for the US to act. Iran and Russia are taking advantage of America's retreat from the Middle East and are apparently working together to preserve Assad in Syria as the key to the arc of influence they seek from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. President Obama is correct to be leery of another quagmire, but that is the price of leadership! The worst possible scenario for the Middle East is for Iran and

Russia to increase their power and their influence in this region. It is not in the interest of the US and it is indeed a national security threat to the US for Russia and Iran to become more powerful in the Middle East. Further, such a development would be disastrous for Israel. The US is a world leader and President Obama must act decisively in the Middle East. There is no other power significant enough to challenge Russia and Iran. His disengagement, his dabbling and indecision must end!

See editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (1 May, 25-26 May and 15-16 June 2013); *The Economist* (26 January 2013), pp. 21-23; Liz Sly in the *Washington Post* (12 June 2013).