

Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the War on Terror: An Interim Update

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In Brief

- The United States continues to lose ground in the “war on terror.”
- Despite decreasing levels of violence in Iraq, the number of terrorist incidents continues to rise globally.
- The geographic spread of Islamic extremism and recent events in Pakistan are notable causes for concern.

There have been three key developments in the six months since we issued “Are We Winning? Measuring Progress in the Struggle Against Violent Jihadism,” a report that analyzed 10 key metrics of success in the “war on terror.” First, while violence in Iraq has declined, Islamist attacks have increased worldwide. Second, jihadist recruits are coming from new areas, suggesting the continued appeal and spread of the jihadist ideology. Finally, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and the defeat of parties loyal to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in parliamentary elections exposed serious flaws in U.S.-Pakistan policy. Taken together, these developments suggest that the United States continues to lose ground overall in the war on terror, although there are hopeful signs that might foreshadow genuine progress in the coming year.

Terrorist attacks claimed by jihadist groups outside of the two war theaters in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to surge upward in the first three quarters of 2007.¹ It is becoming increasingly clear that, as our earlier report argued, Iraq is not the central front in the “war on terror.” Indeed, the data continues to demonstrate that “progress” in Iraq is fundamentally disconnected from the struggle against the broader global jihadist movement. Improvements in Iraq bring us closer to

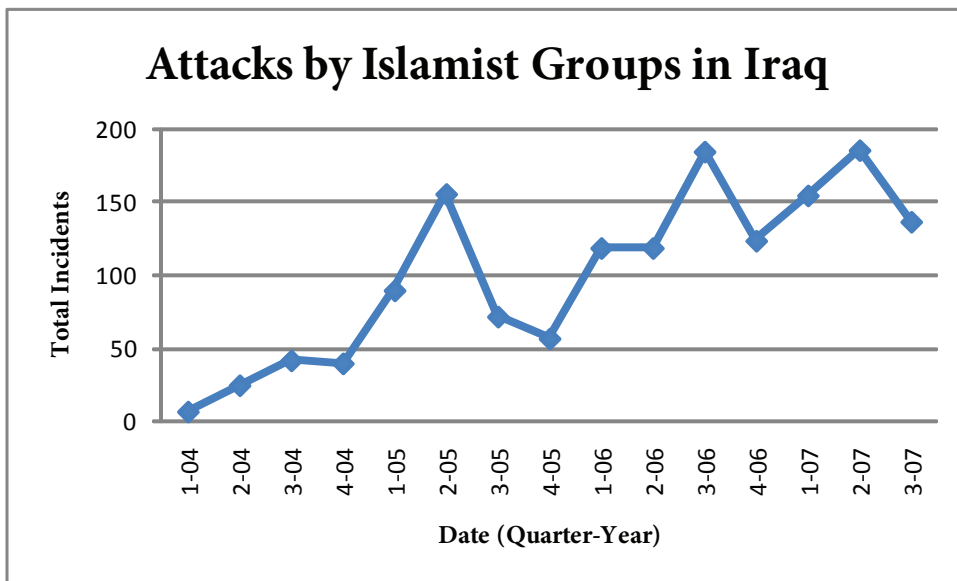
1. NCTC Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, <http://wits.nctc.gov> (accessed February 7, 2008). Our previous report relied upon terrorist incident data from the Terrorism Knowledge Base (TKB), which tracks terrorist activity since 1963. This was particularly useful for establishing the long-term trends we described in the first report. For this six-month update and into the future, we are utilizing terrorist incident data from the Worldwide Incident Tracking System (WITS) produced by the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC).

undoing the harm caused by the war—in particular the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq—to our campaign against violent jihadists, but we have yet to make any measurable progress against the global threat.

Surging Ahead in Iraq, Falling Behind Elsewhere

A key development over the past six months has been the rout of al Qaeda in Iraq.² It is unclear whether this trend is permanent. Many observers consider the situation in Iraq to be more tenuous than some of the more optimistic statements of administration officials.³ Nevertheless, the combination of an increased American troop presence, the “awakening” of Sunni Iraqis to the depredations of al Qaeda, and the decision of major Shiite militias to halt operations has both dramatically reduced the violence in Iraq and made the environment much less accommodating to al Qaeda in Iraq.

There is a lively debate among analysts about the key drivers of success in turning Iraqi Sunnis against al Qaeda. The most optimistic interpretations argue that the main cause was Iraqi Sunni rejection of the jihadist ideology. At close quarters, the jihadists were seen less as heroic resistance fighters and more as rigid, religious fanatics, intent on imposing an alien ideology on Iraqis.⁴ This leads to an optimistic judgment that Iraq is not fertile soil for jihadism and that we are seeing a real rejection of al Qaeda.



Some analysts, however, argue that the key dynamic was Iraqi xenophobia and resentment of foreign fighters that come largely from Saudi Arabia, and increasingly Libya. This more cautious assessment suggests the possibility of jihadism rebuilding a base in Iraq under indigenous leadership.

Other, more problematic interpretations focus on the role of U.S. troops. Some

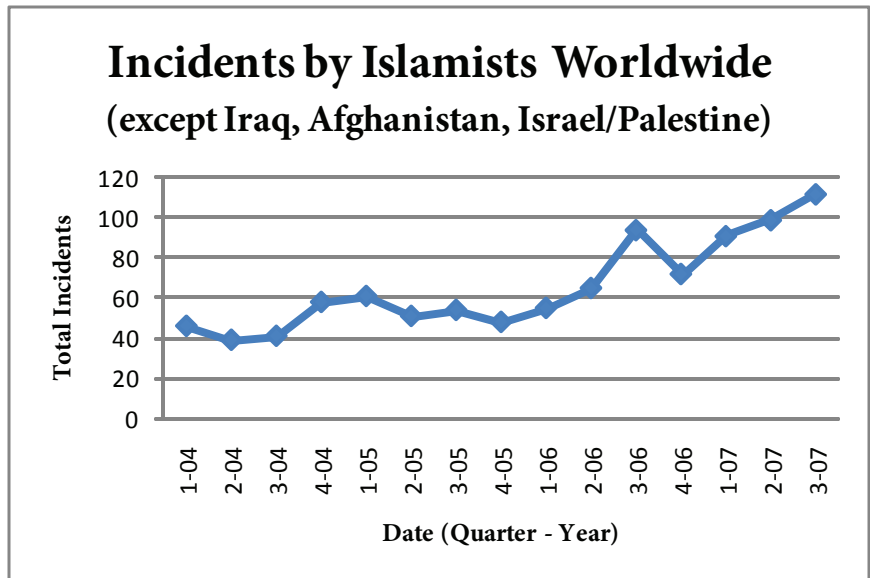
have argued that the pacification of Iraqi Sunnis has been due to more effective American counter-insurgency doctrine and a larger military presence. This assessment suggests that American capacity

2. White House Office of the Press Secretary, “President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror in Las Vegas, Nevada,” news release, January 31, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080131-2.html>.
 3. Eric Alterman and George Zornick, “Think Again: The Surge Goes on Forever (and the Spinning Never Ends),” Center for American Progress, February 28, 2008, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/02/surge_goes_on.html.
 4. Sam Dagher, “Sunni Muslim Sheikhs Join US in Fighting Al Qaeda,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2007, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0503/p01s04-wome.html?page=1>.

has increased, but also that gains in Iraq are only as durable as the American presence. The gains of the “surge” may only serve to pressure the United States to maintain a long-term occupation of Iraq. On the contrary, some analysts have argued that it was the threat or promise of an American drawdown that spurred Sunni leaders to act, which suggests that if the drawdown slows, or if Sunnis find the post-drawdown situation unacceptable, they may once again embrace the jihadists.

There are also some very cynical interpretations. Part of the dynamic in Sunni-dominated areas is that the United States has essentially paid off Sunni militias and consented to their effective dominance of western Iraq. This interpretation suggests that if payments ceased, or the Iraqi central government sought to exercise effective control over western Iraq, violence could again flare up.⁵

Regardless, Iraq remains a potent rallying cry for the global jihadist movement. While a long-term occupation of Iraq may be necessary to secure the defeat of al Qaeda there, the presence of American forces in Iraq clearly feeds the broader threat. There are no simple solutions. Decisions about the future of American forces in Iraq will have to acknowledge the very real tradeoffs associated with all possible courses of action. The biggest risk to American policy is the belief that gains in Iraq translate to gains in the broader “war on terror.” Similarly, it is unlikely that simply withdrawing from Iraq will prove a panacea either.



Spread of the Jihadist Movement and New Reservoirs of Extremism

In the first three quarters of 2007, the jihadist movement scored a number of major successes. Groups affiliated with al Qaeda expanded their operations in Pakistan, North Africa, and East Africa. Taliban jihadists attacked in the Swat valley in Pakistan.⁶ Al Qaeda in the Maghreb strengthened its presence in Algeria and Morocco. In East Africa, a vast conflict nexus involving Somalia, Sudan, and Chad has become a fertile home for al Qaeda-affiliated groups.

5. Sudarsan Raghavan and Amit R. Paley, “Sunni Forces Losing Patience with U.S.,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/02/27/ST2008022703992.html>.

6. Timothy Hoyt, “Pakistan and the United States: Rebalancing the Relationship,” American Security Project, January 29, 2008, http://www.americansecurityproject.org/pakistan_and_united_states_rebalancing_relationship. Andrew Black, “Recasting Jihad in the Maghreb,” *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, October 25, 2007, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373742>.

Terror plots discovered in Europe—including one involving a group of doctors in Britain—show that the reach of al Qaeda in Muslim communities in Europe remains strong and may be expanding beyond its traditional stronghold of disaffected and disenfranchised young men.⁷

Much of the core membership of the jihadist movement has traditionally come from the heart of the Arab world, especially Arabia and Egypt, and South Asia, most notably Pakistan and Afghanistan. Increasingly, a third recruitment area has developed in North Africa, from Libya to Morocco. This geographical widening of the recruitment pool for the jihadist movement—especially when linked with the unrest in Muslim communities throughout Western Europe—makes it clear that we have not yet turned the corner to stem the tide of the jihadist movement.

There is no order of battle for the jihadist movement. Jihadist organizations are largely clandestine. As a result, all estimates of the number of jihadists worldwide are based on loosely-supported assessments. Realistically, the best way to assess the strength of the movement is by looking at the number of attacks associated with jihadist groups and their geographical reach. In both of these categories, the jihadist threat continues to grow.

An area of increasing debate is the meaning of the rise of copycat jihadists—untrained individuals motivated by internet propaganda and dreams of personal glory.⁸ Some analysts see the threat from these individuals as less significant than that posed by traditional al Qaeda operatives who possess significant paramilitary training and are well versed in religious debates. Other analysts see this cultural popularization of jihad as a particularly dangerous dynamic.

Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

The recent assassination of Benazir Bhutto seems to have galvanized Pakistani public opinion around the importance of confronting the Islamist threat. Recent polls show that Islamist parties in Pakistan are favored by only a small sliver of the population, but the polls also show deep skepticism about working closely with the United States.⁹

The challenge in Pakistan was that the Pervez Musharraf regime seemed determined to proceed against jihadist groups at the slowest pace possible. Using the cover of the fight against Islamist radicals, Musharraf's crackdowns tended to focus on civil society activists protesting for the rule of law. Musharraf also repeatedly barred the United States from undertaking operations on Pakistani soil in pursuit of radical groups, even in parts of the country that are outside of the central government's direct control. Friendly interpretations of Musharraf's approach highlight his difficulties in balancing his

7. Stephen Schwartz, "Scientific Training and Radical Islam," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2008.

8. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

9. Kenneth Ballen and Reza Aslan, "Radical Shift in Pakistan: Islamists' support drops," *Baltimore Sun*, February 27, 2008, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bal-op.pakistan27feb27,0,4633818.story>.

commitment to fight terror with the sensitivities of Pakistani public opinion. But recent events support a more cynical interpretation, namely that Musharraf did not want to crack down on Islamist radicals since, ultimately, their presence is what provided his regime with legitimacy in dealing with the West.

The recent parliamentary elections in Pakistan will require us to reconsider our policy toward that country. Given the domestic political situation in Pakistan, there may be promising opportunities to pressure Musharraf or, alternately, to reach out directly to the Pakistani people in an effort to promote both democracy and counter-terror activities. While in some cases pragmatism may require compromise with authoritarian elites, in the case of Pakistan, we may be facing a special moment where our interests and values come together in justifying a reversal of the previous policy of accommodating Musharraf.

It remains to be seen whether the United States will be able to take advantage of what is likely a fleeting opportunity. The current administration's policy of seeking to extend Musharraf's rule despite parliamentary defeats is likely to be counter-productive. Nonetheless, there are no simple solutions that balance the need to engage legitimate political actors who promote Islamism while marginalizing terrorist supporters. The recent offer by the Pakistani Taliban to negotiate with the newly empowered parliamentary parties ought to be greeted with skepticism yet not dismissed out of hand.

Conclusions

Al Qaeda remains a global force and the jihadist ideology continues to spread. Al Qaeda has established a safe haven in Pakistan. There is no solid evidence to suggest al Qaeda is being squeezed financially, and some evidence suggests that it has access to all the resources it needs to continue to remain a major worldwide threat. Al Qaeda seems to be drawing recruits from a wider geographic area and also acquiring as adherents self-motivated individuals willing to launch attacks without any specific direction or control. Progress in Iraq is simply not sufficient to warrant an optimistic assessment of the "war on terror" more broadly.

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a bipartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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