

Counterterrorism after bin Laden

Despite recent successes, it's too early to declare victory in the "war on terror"

By *per Concordiam* Staff
Photos by Agence France-Presse

For Jamie Shea, deputy assistant secretary general for NATO's emerging security challenges division, the success of unmanned drones in suppressing terrorism has been obvious. "If you're al-Qaida, you're filling the No. 2 and No. 3 spots every week," Shea said without much exaggeration at the Global Counter Terrorism Conference in London in April 2012.

The changing nature of security threats after the death of bin Laden has encouraged some analysts to proclaim the cessation of the "global war on terror." But more cautious observers, well represented at the London conference, suggested the threat has merely morphed from a conspiracy, centrally controlled in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to a loose confederation of independent operators motivated more by regional grievances than a violent attachment to global jihad. "It's terrorism inspired by al-Qaida but not directed by it," said Charles Farr, director of the United Kingdom's Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism.

Violent extremists have failed so far to co-opt the Arab Spring, the mass uprisings that forced leaders of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt from power. But all is not well in a part of the world where Islamist movements are gaining democratic strength. Josef Janning, director of studies at the European Policy Centre in Brussels, said that religiously oriented reformist governments taking charge in places such as Egypt will be hard-pressed to deliver the jobs and dignity demanded by their citizens. "That's where governments will have to deliver," Janning said. "That's where they will fail." Turkey is worth emulating, but Janning casts doubts on whether its model of democracy and economic growth will take root successfully in places such as Egypt, where recent public opinion polls show strong support for Saudi Arabia's theocratic-style government.

A frustrated citizenry in the Middle East is likely to have repercussions for Europe. Since children still make up more than a third of the populations in most Arab-speaking countries, Europe will likely face increasing migratory pressure from the South. In Janning's view, the situation calls for increased cooperation within

the European Union, where individual nations, despite the abolishment of border control across much of the continent through the Schengen agreement, still cling to independent immigration policies. Janning called European security a "common good" whose burden should be shared across member states, but expressed dismay that the continent seemed to be heading in the opposite direction toward "unbundling."

As evidence of changing attitudes toward migration, he noted that as recently as the late 1990s, Germany accepted hundreds of thousands of non-EU refugees from the Balkans without provoking complaints from nations with which it shared open borders. But when about 15,000 North Africans arrived in Italy in 2011 to escape turmoil in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia, at least one Schengen country temporarily reinstated border controls with its neighbors. To help reassure Schengen signatories, Janning proposed the creation of a common border control policy that would allow German and Dutch guards, for example, to monitor the Black Sea coast.

But will Europe have the means to defend itself? Military downsizing in the eurozone has called forth critiques that European states are not only "free riding" on their North American NATO partners but reducing forces to the point that they would struggle to repel an attack on their territory. With Europe immersed in budgetary crises, most countries can no longer afford military extravagance.

Shea emphasized that smart defense – the theory of doing more militarily with less money – does not have to mean expensive defense. As an example, he mentioned how NATO has spent billions of dollars on manpower and technology to thwart improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, in Afghanistan. At the same time, a little-noticed



The mother of murdered French paratrooper Imad Ben Ziaten carries a memorial portrait of her son in Morocco in March 2012. Ziaten was killed by a self-proclaimed al-Qaida terrorist in Toulouse, France, one of the country's worst attacks in years.



program costing a couple of hundred thousand dollars achieved striking results by confiscating nitrogen-based IED components moving across the Pakistani-Afghan border. “The big, expensive military intervention is not always the best,” Shea said.

Nevertheless, Shea cautioned against economizing too much. He warned that the very success of remote-controlled weaponry and unmanned aerial vehicles could give rise to a “permanent state of hostilities.” NATO and its partners would no longer have to declare war but could harry adversaries perpetually from afar. Not only would it expose innocent civilians to greater risk, but it might make NATO less willing to disentangle itself from what it views as cheaper, low-intensity conflicts.

At the end of 2014, with the withdrawal of most forces from Afghanistan, NATO will be in the unique position of having no main adversary or international mission for the first time in about 60 years. The Soviet Union, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and the

Taliban in Afghanistan successively filled those roles for most of the Alliance’s existence. In Shea’s opinion, one of the greatest dangers is that NATO members, who have learned to operate together in the hostile conditions of Afghanistan, will become preoccupied with domestic concerns. “How do we preserve all of that hard-won interoperability?” he asked before a crowd of security professionals in London. Janning went further, warning that without the contributions of stronger NATO members such as the U.S., Europe couldn’t defend its territory on a future battlefield. He suggested the continent economize by, among other measures, unifying Europe’s myriad independent military staffs.

In the end, the aim of Western counterterror policy isn’t the total elimination of violent extremists, but the reduction of the problem so that it can be managed largely by police and intelligence officers instead of Soldiers, Shea said. That’s no longer out of the realm of possibility. For all the fears of “lone wolf” or



“self-starter” terrorism, casualties have been lighter than initially feared. Shea cited the example of the U.S., where among 96 recently uncovered terror plots, only 11 had become operational and just two produced victims. On the other hand, two recent European terrorist attacks – one in Norway, the other in France – proved that even solitary fanatics employing little more than bullets can create deadly havoc.

Benoit Gomis of International Security Programme at the UK’s Chatham House credited the International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan with much of the decline in terror attacks, but also cited the unpopularity of the extremist agenda in the Arab world, an agenda that speaks little to the political and economic aspirations of most Middle Easterners. For American historian Michael Rubin, another speaker at the London terrorism conference, the fight against terrorism and extremism hasn’t

ended but has reached the “end of the beginning.”

NATO will have its hands full with a series of new security challenges like those in cyberspace that Shea suggests will ultimately be policed by international tribunals and governed by treaties similar to those used to limit and ban nuclear and biological weapons. The Alliance has also grown apprehensive over energy security and is committed to stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But despite recent allied victories on the battlefield, terrorism seems likely to remain a front-and-center threat. Said Shea: “Terrorism is going to be with us, regrettably, even after NATO’s mission in Afghanistan will end.” □

Left: Egyptians mark the first anniversary of the uprising that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Many experts suspect turmoil in North Africa could have implications for European security as democratically elected governments struggle to deliver economic and social change fast enough for a restless electorate.

Right: Spanish Crown Prince Felipe, center, looks at an unmanned drone while visiting Camp Arena in Afghanistan. Although drones have been effective counterterrorism tools, some military experts worry European militaries will shortchange other defense spending.