

# **The True Lessons of Yemen and Detroit**

## **How the US Must Expand and Redefine International Cooperation in Fighting Terrorism**

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Please note that this document is a working draft and will be revised regularly. To comment, or to provide suggestions and corrections, please email the author at [acordesman@gmail.com](mailto:acordesman@gmail.com).

## **The True Lessons of Yemen and Detroit: The Need to Expand and Redefine International Cooperation in Fighting Terrorism**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

As Americans we naturally focus on the most direct threats to the United States, and what all too many in the West have seen as a clash between civilizations. It is important, however, to keep what is happening in perspective. The latest State Department report on terrorism contains a report by the Counterterrorism Center that ranks the countries that have been the subject of the most serious attacks. These data are summarized in Chart One and the US and Western Europe at not even on the chart. It is nations with large Muslim populations that face the vast majority of threats.

It is also clear that there is no meaningful way to separate threats of “terrorism” from threats of insurgency. The same data from the Counterterrorism Center show that the two countries where the United States and its allies are actively fighting insurgencies – Iraq and Afghanistan – dominated by Islamist elements – Iraq and Afghanistan – are the countries where “terrorism” has played a dominant role. These data skew the overall picture of where terrorism occurs in the world as the number of terrorist attacks in the “rest of the world” has overtaken Afghanistan and Iraq, especially given the number of terrorist attacks occurring in Pakistan.

We face a threat that involves far more than terrorism. It should not take a series of attacks in Yemen, or an attempted airline bombing, to remind us that we are involved in a struggle for the future of Islam that affects virtually every country with a significant Muslim population and has spilled over into rest of the world. Moreover, this struggle is not driven by a handful of extremists. It is driven by ideological, political, demographic, and economic forces that could make extremist violence an enduring threat for the next decade and probably the next quarter century.

### **The Five Keys to Defeating Violent Extremism**

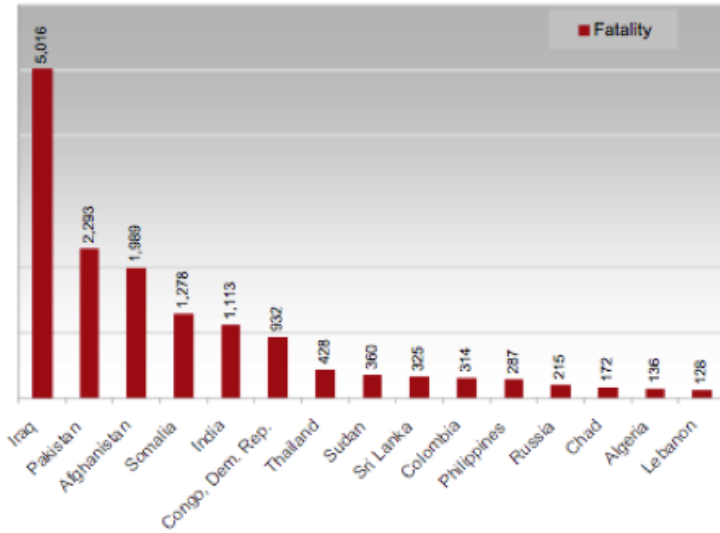
The question is what can we credibly do about a threat this large, and enduring, and which is ultimately ideological in character and shaped by fundamentally different religious and cultural values:

- *The most obvious answer is to continue improving US counterterrorism capabilities.* The practical problem, however, is that no level of improvement can counter a mix of threats that grows steadily more powerful outside the United States, that takes control of governments, that threatens US strategic interest outside our territory, and that threatens our friends and allies. Making the counterterrorism and intelligence community the scapegoat for the inevitable limits and failures of a system that will always be imperfect and fail to anticipate every new threat and form of attack is politically convenient and functionally futile.

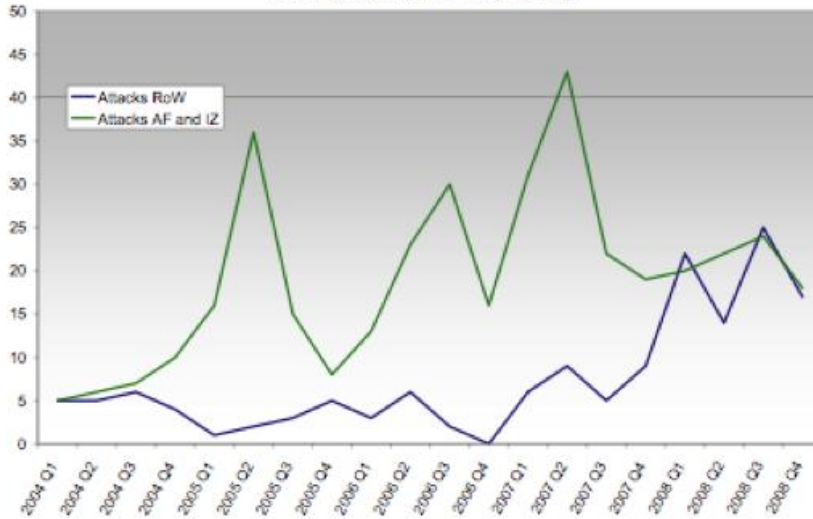
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- *The second answer is to put even more emphasis on international cooperation in counterterrorism.* Our first line of defense lies in the capabilities and actions of other states – particularly our friends and allies in Muslim states and states with large Muslim populations. Defeating terrorism locally -- before it can establish major sanctuaries, create international networks, escalate to insurgency, take control of governments – is critical to any broad success. The US must continue to work with other states, and strengthen formal international efforts in counterterrorism – in spite of their limits – but that much more is required. Informal efforts will be as important. One has only to consider what would have happened if we had not steadily improved counterterrorism cooperation and support from countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to realize how much more often the US would be under direct threat; how much more often our other allies would be attacked, and how many of our global economic and strategic interests would face far more serious threats.
- *A third answer is to redefine the struggle to deal with the fact that it is as much a problem in counterinsurgency as it is in counterterrorism in the narrow sense of the term.* Afghanistan and Iraq are the most obvious cases in point, but they are scarcely the preferred solution. No matter how much the US adapts to counterinsurgency and concepts like “hybrid warfare,” it lacks the forces to fight in every threatening area, and US and other Western forces will never be the best solution in nations that fear any foreign intervention and have a different religion and culture. The best solution will be to build up local counterinsurgency and paramilitary capabilities; to use Special Forces, covert action, and US intelligence and strike capabilities to help host countries. In practice, every US-driven exercise in counterinsurgency and armed nation building should be seen as an American strategic failure – a failure to understand that the United States should anticipate the escalation of such threats and work locally and with host governments to defeat them while they are still weak. Any approach to “hybrid warfare” or counterinsurgency that is “US-centric” is a failure by definition. It poses an impossible demand for resources to fight the wrong war in the wrong place.
- *A fourth answer is to understand that US aid in governance and economics, public diplomacy and information campaigns, and strong national efforts by US Embassy country teams is critical to easing the conditions that breed extremist violence.* One need to be careful about what the US can and cannot do – even when working closely with other allies and the international community. The mix of problems that drive extremism varies sharply between states, but most Muslim countries face a scale of economic problems that even the most effective aid efforts – or massive efforts at armed national building –cannot solve within a decade or more, if they can be solved at all. The United States can, however, use aid and active diplomacy selectively and as a catalyst. It can help in a crisis or give weak governments breathing space and time to evolve. Moreover, the US can show at the national and local level that it is serious about its goals and values, that it is not the enemy of Islam, and that it is willing to help governments that are capable of helping themselves. Education, expertise, and cultural exchanges are critical tools in this struggle – if they are applied at the scale and with the consistency to make a difference and are tailored to national needs.
- *The most important answer, however, may be for Americans to act on the reality that only Islamic countries, religious leaders, intellectuals, and political figures who can win the ideological battle which is the true key to any lasting success.* There are many ways the US and the West can help, but the battle for minds and souls is not a clash between civilizations, it is a struggle within one. No matter how successful we are in directly fighting individual terrorists and extremist movements, we will win or lose by working with friendly and allied Muslim states governments, and peoples.

**Chart One: US Comparative Estimates of Terrorist Activity Deaths by Country:**



**Comparison of High-Fatality Sunni Attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan versus Rest of World from 2004 to 2008**



National Counterterrorism Center, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2008*, <http://www.nctc.gov/> pp. 24 and 17.

## **A Broader Approach to International Cooperation in Counterterrorism**

The Burke Chair has developed an analysis of the broader improvements required in a draft report for a conference on international cooperation in counterterrorism in Turkey. It is entitled *International Cooperation in Counterterrorism: Redefining the Threat and the Requirement*, and is available on the CSIS web site at:

[http://csis.org/files/publication/100125\\_IntCoopinfightterror.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100125_IntCoopinfightterror.pdf)

This report draws on lessons and the successes of the near decade since 9/11, and to speak to both Western and Muslim audiences. The footnotes to the report also describe the progress that has taken place in formal cooperation in the UN, NATO, Interpol, and other international organizations over the last decade.

It is particularly important that Americans understand how important such improvements have already been, and how important they will be in the future. The US could not have intervened in Afghanistan or Iraq without the support of local states, and its allies from outside the region. It cannot hope to use force or armed nation building to intervene in the range of Muslim states, or states with large Muslim populations that must now deal with Islamist extremism or terrorism. It must instead work with these states to strengthen their capabilities, or see more countries like Yemen and Somalia come under extremist rule.

## **Understanding the Scale of the Forces Involved**

At the same time, the US needs to reconsider its own strategy and pay more attention to the need for a comprehensive long-term approach to improving US cooperation with key countries. Far too much American political and media rhetoric focuses on the most immediate problem country, and narrowly focused short term efforts to directly protect the United States...hardly a compelling motivation for America's partners.

An effective US strategy must recognize the sheer scale of the forces that breed extremism and why a quick and simple solution is impossible. A near decade of new studies of terrorism and extremism has not found any simple or agreed upon explanation of the causes of terrorism, or what motivates extremists to take violent action. There is no simple correlation between poverty, education, employment and lack of opportunity, social status, failed governance, religious beliefs, sectarian and ethnic tensions, per group pressure and conditioning, urbanization and social dislocation, and other factors that have emerged from such studies. All are partial causes, and yet the core groups of violent extremists always remain small even in the "worst case" countries unless they decline into internal conflict and insurgency.

Yemen is a case in point. US officials have recently issued reassuring statements about the situation in Yemen, and the US should do what it can to aid and motivate the Saleh government. These statements, however, gloss over just how serious the forces involved are. Yemen has been a source of extremism and instability since the 1960s, has fought several civil conflicts before reaching an uncertain unity, and remains deeply divided by

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tribe, region, and sect. Moreover, it has never had effective governance, and effective government services like health care and education.

Demographic and economic forces are only one cause of violent extremism, but they illustrate the scale of the pressures that threaten to tear many Middle Eastern and Muslim states apart. The population growth and income disparities in key countries in the region are shown in **Charts Two and Three**, and from observing these figures one can see that the situation in Yemen clearly derives at least in part from these factors. The US census bureau estimates that Yemen's population was only 9.8 million in 1960, but it rose to 14.9 million in 1995, and is 28.3 million today. Even though it projects a significant cut in the future rate of population growth, the Census Bureau projects that the population of Yemen will reach 32.7 million people in 2025, and 45.8 million in 2050. The CIA estimates that some 46% of this population is now 14 years of age or younger, and Yemen's population will remain extraordinarily young for the next half century.

While youth and poverty do not necessarily breed extremism and terrorism, the CIA estimates that Yemen ranks 175<sup>th</sup> in the world in per capita income, a ranking nearly three times lower than its neighbor Saudi Arabia (60<sup>th</sup>). Virtually every expert agrees that even with projected increases in economic aid, Yemen will not become significantly wealthier in terms of per capita income in the near future. It will not solve its water crisis, it will not reduce its dependence on narcotics, nearly half of its population will continue to remain below the poverty line, and unemployment and underemployment will be well over 35%.

This does not mean that Yemen's problems are unsolvable, but it does mean that aid will not lead to quick progress, that it is functionally meaningless to talk about "draining the swamp" that causes terrorism in the foreseeable future, and that many of the conditions needed for stable government are lacking. Most important, it means that any stable victory against terrorism in Yemen is years away, and that such a victory must be won by Yemenis at the religious and ideological level, and not through any practical combination of counter terrorism and aid.

Yemen is only one case out of dozens of countries afflicted with similar problems. Iraq is a far more developed country; however, more than three decades of suffering have reduced Iraq to a ranking of 162<sup>nd</sup> in per capita income while other Middle Eastern countries like Kuwait and Qatar rank 6<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world, respectively. While Iraq has far more resources than Yemen, it too is under tremendous demographic pressure. Its population was only 6.8 million in 1960, but it rose to 19.6 million in 1995, and is 28.9 million today. Even though it again projects a significant cut in the future rate of population growth, the Census Bureau projects that Iraq will have 40.4 million people by 2025, and 56.3 million by 2050.

If one looks at the Arab world – which only includes a small part of the states with major Muslim populations -- the most recent Arab development report, *United Nations Development Programme: Arab Knowledge Report 2009—Towards Productive Intercommunication for Knowledge* notes that their overall per capita income rose from

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\$5,038 in 2001 to about \$8,000 in 2008, but that this rise lagged badly behind much of the world.

More broadly, an analysis of this same report by Dr. Nimrod Raphaeli of MEMRI notes that the report indicates that,

The 10-24 age group accounts for two-thirds of the population, and is expected to number between 125 and 150 million by 2025. Many of these young people are unemployed, and data show that unemployment rates have risen: in the 1980s, the weighted average unemployment rate was 10.6 percent, in the 1990s it rose to 14.5, with the highest level being recorded in Algeria (25.3%) and the lowest in Syria (8.1%).

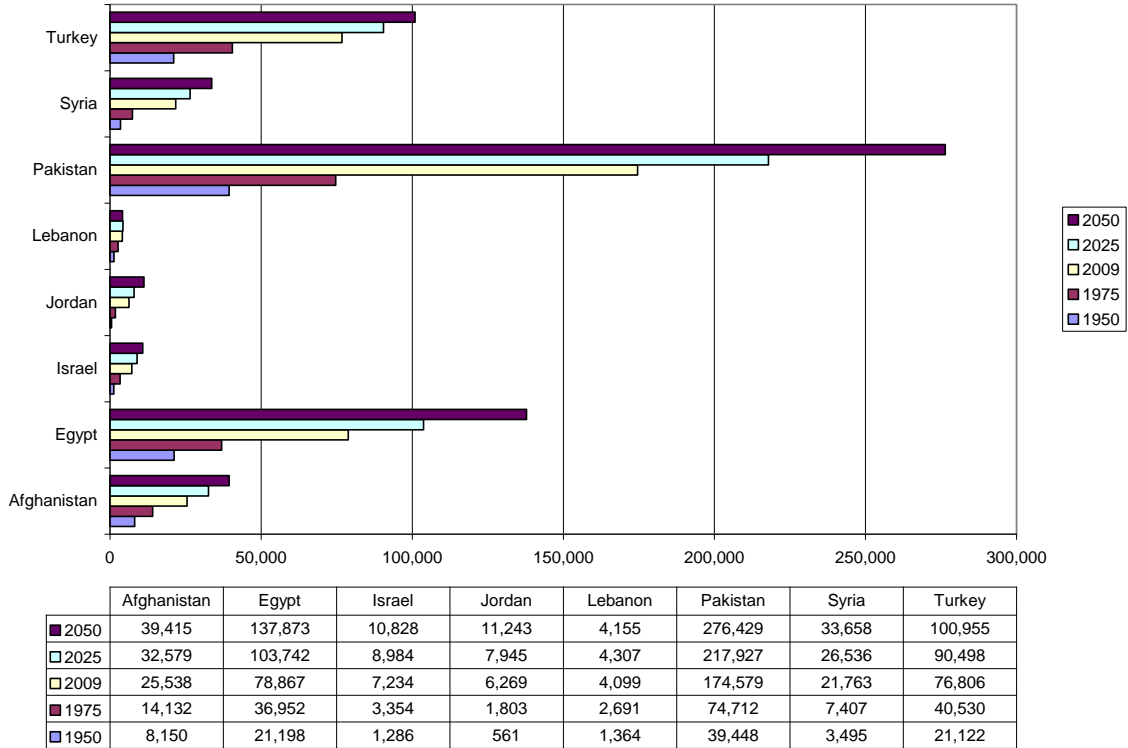
The unemployment rate for young people is far higher than the average unemployment rate for the entire population. In 2005, youth unemployment averaged between 46 percent in Algeria and 6.3 percent in the United Arab Emirates (p. 12). Job creation is not keeping pace with the new entrants to the labor market, so that many of these young people may never be able to earn a living.

These forces are only a small part of the radical changes and pressures on the governments and societies involved, and it seems almost certain that they will trigger regime collapse or produce serious insurgencies in other states. Yet, the United States has already learned from experience that it really only has the forces to carry out one major exercise in armed nation building at a time, and does not have the qualified civilians necessary for even one such effort.

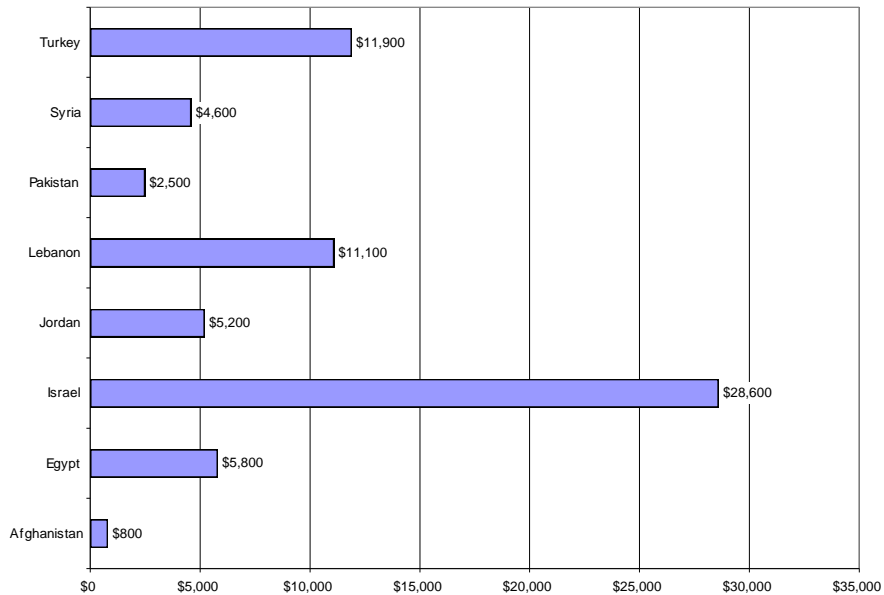
At the same time, the United States has learned in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan that building up local military and counterterrorism is critical to success – even when it receives major aid from its European and other allies. For all of the talk of hybrid warfare, it is all too clear that no amount of feasible change in US forces can substitute for better efforts in forging local partnerships. It is equally clear, that the levels of US, allied, and host country tactical success cannot compensate for ineffective local governance and losing an ideological struggle dominated by religion.

### Chart Two: Near East and South Asia

**Population Explosion: Population in Thousands over Time Period 1950-2050**



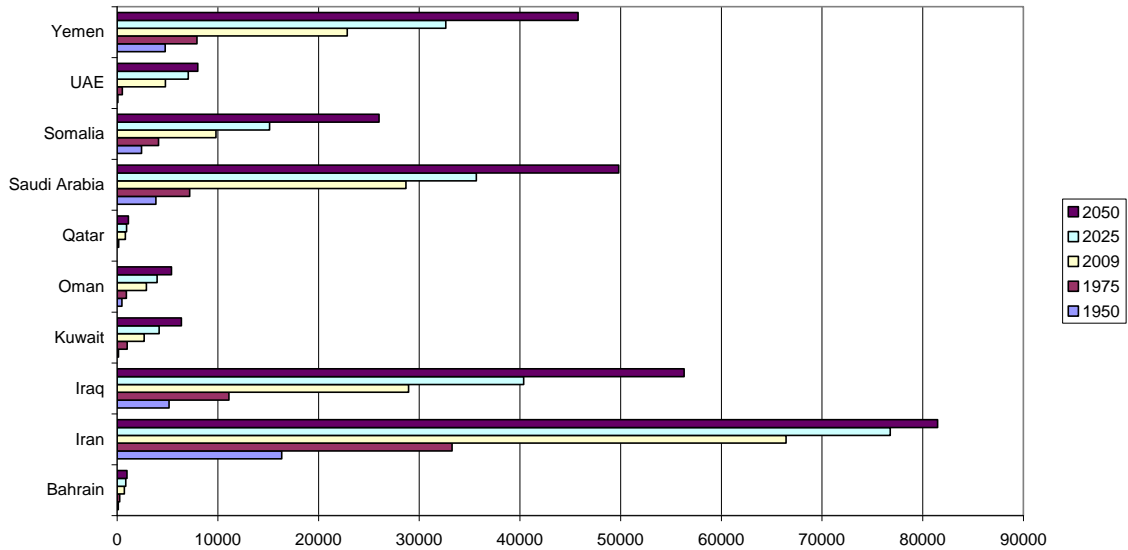
**GDP per Capita 2008: Near East and South Asia**



Source: Population data are taken from US Census Bureau, International Data Base as of January 25, 2010; the GDP per capita data are taken from the CIA, World Factbook, on-line edition, as of January 25, 2010

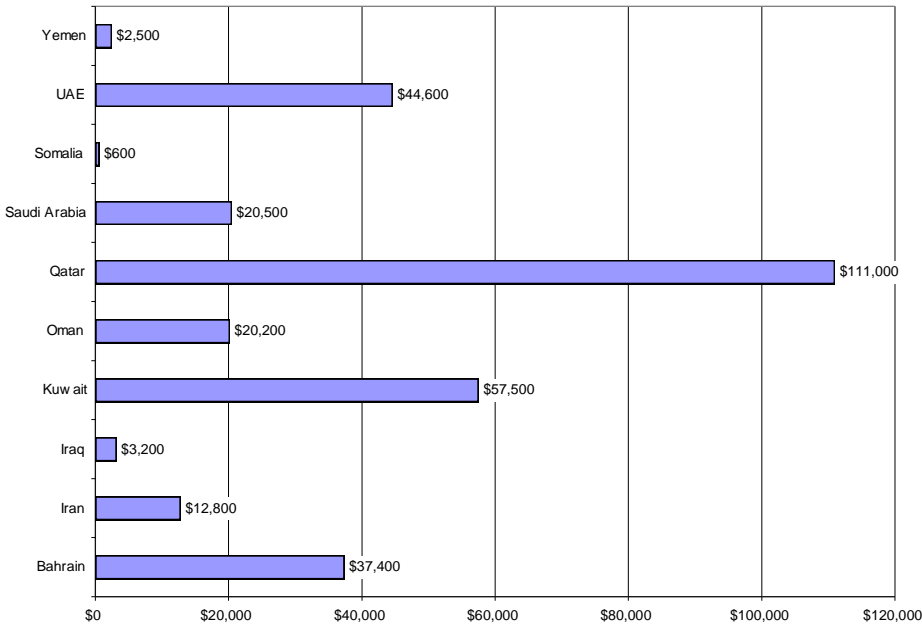
### Chart Three: Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

**Population Explosion: Population in Thousands over Time Period 1950-2050**



	Bahrain	Iran	Iraq	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	Somalia	UAE	Yemen
2050	980	81,490	56,316	6,383	5,402	1,116	49,830	26,025	8,019	45,781
2025	868	76,779	40,387	4,179	3,981	938	35,680	15,148	7,063	32,650
2009	729	66,429	28,946	2,693	2,910	833	28,687	9,832	4,798	22,858
1975	259	33,265	11,118	1,007	920	169	7,205	4,128	523	7,934
1950	115	16,357	5,163	145	489	25	3,860	2,438	72	4,777

### GDP per Capita:



Source: Population data are taken from US Census Bureau, International Data Base as of January 25, 2010; the GDP per capita data are taken from the CIA, World Factbook, on-line edition, as of January 25, 2010.

## Rethinking US Strategy for International Cooperation

In short, we need to look beyond the headlines and the search for the usual scapegoats. We need to firmly reject any form of US-centric approach or the belief that we are somehow dealing with a clash between civilizations. The United States must learn and adapt to the new direct threats to its territory, and it must realize that it cannot succeed by focusing on a war against “terrorism.”

It needs a far more comprehensive approach to international cooperation based on developing a broader matrix of international policy, security, public diplomacy, and aid efforts – led by the US country team in each nation -- that will allow the United States to create more effective partnerships with the governments and peoples living in the Muslim world. Prevention and partnership – and a joint effort to win the ideological struggle -- are the keys to broad and lasting success.

Specifically,

- *The United States should not separate domestic and international counterterrorism efforts directed at preventing terrorists from entering or directly attacking the United States from efforts based on improving US security through broader forms of international cooperation at the formal and informal levels. It needs to develop integrated domestic and international coalitions focused on key missions and functions.* US policies, programs, and budgets should recognize what US counterterrorism experts have long recognized: No amount of reorganization or improvement in US defenses, or centralized action by the intelligence community and the National Counter Terrorism Center can provide full security or even hope to adequately analyze the sheer volume of indicators and “noise” generated by a global mix of threats. Important as such improvements are, they must be part of a comprehensive mix of domestic and international efforts.
- *As the attached analysis shows, improvements in formal international cooperation can still have great value, but the most important areas for US success will lie in informal or formal bilateral and multilateral cooperation with largely Muslim states in East Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, the greater Middle East, and Africa.* In most cases, government-to-government cooperation will be critical. Such cooperation will be most productive with friendly governments, but it will often be possible to cooperate in limited ways even with partially hostile regimes.
- *The United States should not pursue US-centric counterterrorism and counterinsurgency policies, and should instead focus on developing local capabilities and forces.* The United States does not have the resources to carry out hybrid warfare or international counterterrorism on its own, and cannot overcome the problems created by the fact the US has a different culture, political and legal system, and view of religion from many of the states involved. Working to build up local capabilities – and help states on a preventive basis – will be critical. So will steadily expanding US ability to provide suitable trainers and partners for police, paramilitary, counterinsurgency, and rule of law capabilities; and to provide a transfer of skills, technology, and equipment. The US will lose this struggle decisively if it tries to act as a superpower; it can only succeed as a partner.
- *USCENTCOM is the key focus for security efforts.* Security assistance in the broadest sense of the term is only part of the solution, but it is a critical first step. Dealing with the problems of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in the greater Middle East has clear priority, and the US military is the only part of the United State government that has shown the capability to deal flexibly with the required mix of police, paramilitary, and counterinsurgency training and

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partnering efforts. This makes USCENTCOM the logical center for coordinating such activity – although this would require additional resources and a larger integration of intelligence and State Department components.

- *The US should focus on helping states improve governance, their economy, and developing ways to both improve counterterrorism and improve their justice and counterterrorism systems to avoid human rights abuses and win popular support.* The basic themes of President Obama’s Cairo speech are critical to dealing with this threat. As recent events in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan have made all too clear; “democracy” is not a solution to the region’s problems and elections can present as many problems as they solve. At the same time, effective governance and government services are critical to establishing any form of stability, and creating economic development and growth. State abuses of the rule of law may make short terms gains in dealing with terrorism, but can easily alienate large parts of the population or breed new terrorists. Moreover, the states involved are so different in their political structures, in facing the impact of extremism, in demographics, internal tensions, and wealth that the US must develop balanced efforts for each individual country, not simply pursue some broad “fits all” solution based on US political and cultural priorities.
- *The US country team will be the critical focus for broader and enduring success.* International and regional efforts will remain important, but the US needs to beware of false economies of scale and of the idea that it can run “normal” embassies, focused on diplomacy, rather than direct efforts to deal with these threats. Only a country team that mixes counterterrorism, military advisory efforts, aid in governance and rule of law, economic advice and assistance, and educational programs and public diplomacy tailored to a given nation’s needs – and the level of threat in that country – can succeed. Such country teams must also be operational in the field, rather than tied to large fortress embassies, and often must be staffed more by operators than members of the regular Foreign Service. It also will be far more cost-effective to fund such country teams for preventive action than wait until a country reaches its crisis level – as has been the case in countries like Yemen.
- *Encouraging and supporting local governments, religious leaders, educators, media, and politicians in efforts to deal directly with ideological and religious challenges will be equally critical.* None of these US efforts can succeed unless the elites in states with large Muslim populations directly engage with extremists at the ideological and religious levels, conduct a massive strategic communications effort, improve religious education, and provide for reintegration of those caught up in extremist movements. Better US public diplomacy, aid and exchange programs, and other US efforts are critical to improving the image of the United States. The US must act on the principal, however, that it cannot transfer American values to the countries and populations involved. This makes it critical to help local states in their efforts wherever possible. At the same time, the US cannot succeed by giving the equivalent of a political blank check in support of current regimes. The United States must be prepared to confront failed and corrupt governance, and other abuses of power. The focus must be on the people and not the regime. Proactive cooperation in counterterrorism must also find ways to address regime failures and push for reform and change.

*Please note that this paper is a draft and it, and the longer study on **International Cooperation in Counterterrorism: Redefining the Threat and the Requirement**, will be revised as a result of the conference in Turkey and outside comments. Please send outside comments to Anthony H. Cordesman at [acordesman@gmail.com](mailto:acordesman@gmail.com) or to Adam Mausner at [amausner@csis.org](mailto:amausner@csis.org).*