



[Home](#) » [Bureaus/Offices Reporting Directly to the Secretary](#) » [Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism](#) » [Releases](#) » [Remarks Pertaining to Counterterrorism](#) » [2010 Remarks Pertaining to Counterterrorism](#) » The Obama Administration's Counterterrorism Policy at One Year

The Obama Administration's Counterterrorism Policy at One Year

Daniel Benjamin

Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism

Keynote Address at the CATO Institute

Washington, DC

January 13, 2010

Good morning. It's really a pleasure to be here at CATO and back on Massachusetts Avenue's think tank row – a place I was happy to call home. Today I'm really pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you today about the threats we face today and the Obama administration's counterterrorism policies for confronting them.

One of the critical tests of an administration's counterterrorism policies is to see how they emerge from contact with a genuine terrorist event. The attempted Christmas Day bombing nearly cost several hundred people their lives on Northwest Flight 253. We had a very close call. And we are extraordinarily fortunate that no lives were lost. The event was a stark reminder that we are in a constant, pitiless race to head off our foe's relentless technological advances and confront its ability to deploy a changing cast of recruits.

The President has rightly taken us to task for some key failures – above all in the realm of intelligence analysis and watch-listing. Other shortcomings are obvious – we need to have on line the screening techniques and technologies for a new generation of explosive devices. We are working those issues aggressively now.

Equally important, the events of Christmas day demonstrated that some of the understandings that underlay how we organized ourselves for counterterrorism needed updating. Other events in the latter half of 2009 have also underscored how some of our operating assumptions were no longer adequate. Let me name the most outstanding of these assumptions:

First, we know now that al-Qa'ida affiliates – not just the group's core leadership in Pakistan – will indeed seek to carry out strikes against the U.S. homeland. We can no longer count on them to be focused exclusively on the near enemy – on the governments in their own countries.

In subsequent remarks, it is abundantly clear that some among the group appeared to become part of the al-Qa'ida network.

would embrace the essential approach of the mother group. This strategy would lead the group to attempt attacks that would appeal to its target audience of potential sympathizers – they could either be against the near enemy or the far enemy, against us. As I will discuss later, much of our policymaking – especially with regard to the region where this plot was hatched -- has been premised on the conviction that we were headed toward exactly that kind of spread of the threat. But our defensive arrangements – specifically our watchlisting, for example – were not there yet, and that was a clear shortcoming.

Second, for years, we have known about al-Qa'ida's desire to recruit militants with clean records to deploy against the United States. But we had not experienced any really eye-catching efforts to slip into the country in some time, leading some to speculate that the United States has successfully deterred such operatives from entering our borders.

But as a number of recent events have made clear, we cannot afford to have any sense of false security. As we've seen in the last few months in two high-profile law-enforcement cases, individuals who appear to have been trained and handled from the badlands of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan have been operating within our borders. A bus driver, Najibullah Zazi, was trained in Pakistan and now faces charges in federal court for planning to set off a series of bombs in the United States. An indictment that was unsealed in Chicago in December portrays an American citizen—David Headley—allegedly playing a pivotal role in the 2008 attack in Mumbai, which killed more than 170 people and dramatically raised tensions in South Asia. Yes our intelligence and law enforcement tripwires worked. But that is not reason enough for complacency. Because the threat we face is dynamic and evolving.

Let me just say as an aside that the example of David Headley shows al-Qa'ida is not the only group with global ambitions that we have to worry about. Lashkar e-Taiba has made it clear that it is willing to undertake bold, mass-casualty operations with a target set that would please al-Qa'ida planners. The group's more recent thwarted conspiracy to attack the US embassy in Bangladesh should only deepen concern that it could indeed evolve into a genuinely global terrorist threat. Very few things worry me as much as the strength and ambition of LeT, a truly malign presence in South Asia. We are working closely with allies in the region and elsewhere to reduce the threat from this very dangerous group.

A third myth has also been dispelled: Americans are immune to al-Qa'ida's ideology. While domestic incidents of radicalization are significantly lower than in many Western nations, several high profile cases demonstrate that we must remain vigilant. The recent arrest of five Americans in Pakistan suggests that AQ is inspiring U.S. individuals to pursue violence. Similarly, the trickle of individuals who have gone to fight in East Africa demonstrates the group's reach into that region – and even if some go for nationalistic purpose, they are still becoming radicalized later on. The importance of these cases should not be glossed over.

The lesson here is clear. In a long struggle such as the one we're in, there are few greater perils than intellectual stagnation or bureaucratic stasis. Our foe, as the president said the other day, is a nimble adversary, and we have a "never-ending race to protect our country" and "stay one step ahead." Because of the flatness of their organization, a high-level of inspiration, and ingenuity, we need to be on our game all the time. We need to keep mind the words of the 9/11 Report, which in this respect got it precisely right: "It is therefore crucial to find ways of routinizing and even bureaucratizing the exercise of the imagination." This is really the paramount and enduring challenge we face. Staying sharp, innovating our defensive systems and maintaining our intellectual edge – these are all essential.

Now, having observed changes in the threat that demonstrate anew the adaptive qualities of our enemies, I want to add a note of perspective, because we shouldn't ignore their signs of their weaknesses as well. Let me point out three: 1) Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula claimed credit for the Christmas Day plot. Now, can anyone remember the last time al-

Qa'ida or an affiliate claimed credit for a bomb that failed to kill? 2) As our senior intelligence officials have noted, al-Qa'ida in the FATA is under more pressure than ever before. And 3) al-Qa'ida and its supporters are clearly feeling the effect of our work with the international financial community to stop the flow of money to terrorists. Now, as al-Qa'ida affiliates turn to kidnapping for ransom to raise funds, we are urging our partners around the world to adopt a no-concessions policy toward hostage-takers so that we can diminish this alternative funding stream in regions like the Sahel, the FATA, and Yemen. But clearly the point should not be overlooked that their financial circumstances have deteriorated.

We should not score all the points on one side of the ledger. That leads to fear-mongering...blurs the picture...and undercuts our efforts to get our assessments right.

Another challenge we face involves distinguishing what went wrong in the latter half of 2009, specifically on Christmas day, from what did not. In other words, we need to fix the problems that presented themselves and not get into a panic and abandon other parts of our strategy that work. What I'd like to do now is turn from the headlines of the last few weeks to the broader strategy.

Because most of what we are doing is fundamentally sound and will pay off for us in the long term. Let me walk you through it.

If I had spoken to this audience a year or two ago, my view would have been that the United States had developed and was employing great skills at what I call tactical offensive counterterrorism capabilities - taking individual terrorists off the street, and disrupting cells and operations. Yet on the strategic side, I was concerned that we were losing ground in the overall campaign against international terrorism, and in particular that we were failing to trump al-Qa'ida's narrative. In my roughly eight months in office, my view of our tactical capabilities has been more than borne out. I'm pleased to say as well that I believe that this administration is addressing that critically important strategic gap.

In Afghanistan, the President has put forward a clear plan to constrain the Taliban and destroy the al-Qa'ida core, and the Administration and Congress are putting up the resources necessary to achieve that goal. General McChrystal's positive comments yesterday suggest that we are making progress there and that we should not succumb to any easy defeatism.

We are working with Pakistan to establish the kind of relationship, based on trust and mutual interests, that will lead to the defeat of radicalism in that country, which has in recent months seen so much bloodshed. We understand the trust deficit, built up over decades between the United States and Pakistan that created the current situation. We know these challenges will not be overcome overnight. But we are on the right track.

We're also working on those regions outside of South Asia where radicalism has been flourishing. Since December 25, there has been more than a touch of collective hysteria in the press that a new safe haven crawling with terrorists has suddenly appeared in Yemen.

In fact, Yemen was arguably the very first front. If you go all the way back to the last days of the first President Bush's term in December, 1992, perhaps the very first al-Qa'ida attack happened when operatives tried to bomb a hotel housing U.S. troops in Aden who were en route to Somalia to support the UN mission there. Long before the USS Cole was attacked, there were a number of major conspiracies in the 1990s that were also based in Yemen that pointed at Saudi Arabia. The threat has waxed and waned in Yemen since then but is at a peak right now. Al-Qa'ida has always had a foothold in Yemen, and it's always been a concern.

at the State Department, the same day that I was sworn in, Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg said to me, "Here are some of the priorities you need to be looking at," and right at the top of the list was Yemen. We've worked very closely and much more effectively with the Yemeni authorities over the last several months, and we're making some progress. The result of that were the forceful actions beginning last month in Yemen that have continued against AQAP – the most serious in years. And I saw today that there is a report of another senior militant being killed in Yemen by government forces.

Our strategy is to build up the Yemeni capacity to deal with the security threats within their own country, but also to mitigate the very acute economic crisis that Yemen is dealing with. Yemen is grappling with serious poverty, as you all know, it is the poorest country in the Arab world and it complicates governance across a country that is larger than Iraq. Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula takes advantage of insecurity in various regions of Yemen, which is worsened by internal conflicts and competition for governance by tribal and non-state actors. This is why we must address the problem of terrorism in Yemen from a comprehensive, long-term perspective that considers various factors, including assisting with governance and development efforts as well as equipping the country's counterterrorism forces. This effort represents a comprehensive approach to security policy and one that we are implementing in cooperation with other countries, including Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. The Gulf countries are very concerned, and there have been press reports worth noting, that the UAE, for example, allocating more than \$500 million to Yemen.

What we are doing in Yemen is what we are doing in many other countries – building capacity. Consistent diplomatic engagement with counterparts and senior leaders helps build political will for common counterterrorism objectives. When there is political will, we can address the nuts and bolts aspect of capacity building. We are working to make the counterterrorism training of police, prosecutors, border officials, and members of the judiciary more systematic, more innovative, and more far-reaching. Capacity building also includes counterterrorist finance training; it represents a whole-of-government approach. This is both good counterterrorism and good statecraft. We are addressing the state insufficiencies that terrorism thrives on, and we are helping invest our partners more effectively in confronting the threat—rather than looking thousands of miles away for help or simply looking away altogether.

We are also working on what my colleague Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan has called the upstream factors. We need to confront the political, social, and economic conditions that our enemies exploit to win over the new recruits...the funders...and those whose tacit support enables the militants to carry forward their plans. As we look at the problem of transnational terror and its long term implications, we are putting at the core of our strategic policies recognition of the phenomenon of radicalization—that is, we are asking ourselves time and again: Are our actions going to result in the removal of one terrorist with the resulting creation of ten more? What can we do to attack the drivers of radicalization, so that al- Qa'ida and its affiliates finally have a shrinking pool of recruits?

And finally, and vitally, are we hewing to our values in this struggle? Because as President Obama has said from the outset, there should be no tradeoff between our security and our values. Indeed, in light of what we know about radicalization, it is clear that navigating by our values is an essential part of a successful counterterrorism effort. We have moved to rectify the excesses of the past few years by working to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, by forbidding enhanced interrogation techniques, and developing a more systematic method of dealing with detainees. We are also demonstrating our commitment to the rule of law by trying Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and other al-Qa'ida operatives in our criminal court system.

The threat is global and our enemies latch on to grievances on behalf of the entire Muslim world, so we must look to resolve the long-standing problems that fuel those grievances. At the top of the list is the Arab-Israeli conflict, and, as you

know, President Obama, Secretary Clinton, and Special Envoy George Mitchell are working very hard to resolve that.

Even with their efforts, peace in the Middle East will take plenty of time, and as we know, it will not eliminate all of the threats. But while the big policy challenges matter in radicalization, local drivers are also critical in making individuals vulnerable to the appeal of al-Qa'ida's ideology and its narrative. We are developing tailored-approaches to alter them – to deal with issues of education, health care, social welfare and economic opportunity that create the conditions of marginalization and alienation, and perceived—or real—deprivation. In recognition of this, my first step has been to build a unit within my office focusing on what we in the government call “Countering Violent Extremism” in my office to focus on local communities most prone to radicalization. There is a broad understanding across the government that we have not done nearly enough to address underlying conditions for at-risk populations—and we have also not done enough to improve the ability of moderates to voice their views and strengthen opposition to violence.

To be sure, terrorism is a common challenge shared by nations across the globe—one that requires diplomacy—and one that the United States cannot solve alone. The Obama administration has worked hard to reach out and, on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect, to forge international coalitions. The administration has been working at reinvigorating alliances across the board and reengaging in the multilateral fora concerned with counterterrorism—fora that, in all honesty, were neglected for some time at the many UN entities, the G8, and the vast range of regional organizations that are eager to engage on counterterrorism issues. The net effect of our work has been manifold: We are increasing the pool of donors for capacity building. We are strengthening the international sense of resolve against terror. We are also strengthening global norms so that countries jointly do a better job to build security together.

As December 25 made clear, there is still much to figure out, and there can be no assurance of a future without real setbacks. December 25 certainly underscored the continuing peril we face, the determination of our foes, and the evolving complexity of the overall threat.

Contemporary terrorism has been decades in the making and it will take many more years to unmake it. There is much we still need to learn, especially about how to prevent individuals from choosing the path of violence. But I believe we now have the right framework for our policies, and ultimately, I am confident, this will lead to the decisions and actions that will strengthen security for our nation and for the global community.

Thank you for coming to listen today. I'd be happy to take your questions.

The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.