

By Reva Bhalla

One day after 9/11, U.S. President George W. Bush declared a global "war on terror."

Al Qaeda had first reared its head years before in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1998 U.S. Embassy attacks in East Africa and the 2000 USS Cole bombing, but it was not until the World Trade Center towers came crashing down that the global international security community became almost completely consumed with battling global jihadism.

Professors of political Islam came out of the woodwork, Osama bin Laden became a household name, university students started pouring into Arabic language courses and, for the first time, terrorism became a national security priority. This era became known as the "post-9/11 world."

A great deal of debate continues within the international security community over the strength of the al Qaeda organization now as compared to seven years ago, with much of the U.S. intelligence community under the impression that al Qaeda is now stronger than it was before Sept. 11, 2001. Stratfor, on the other hand, has long maintained that the al Qaeda core - the tight group of individuals under the leadership of bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri that masterminded the 9/11 attacks - has seen its leadership and operational capability significantly decline over the past seven years.

A strategic threat to the U.S. homeland on the scale of 9/11 requires things like a transnational financial network to wire funds, highly trained operatives disciplined in operational security, undetected preoperational surveillance of targets, and safe-haven territory that is not constantly being bombarded with airstrikes, among other essentials. While al Qaeda prime is busy dodging missiles and making videos, al Qaeda franchises are by and large struggling to stay relevant in their theaters of operation (e.g., Iraq) or are shifting over to a more active area of operation (e.g., Afghanistan).

This is not to say, however, that terrorism is dead. The jihadist movement has decentralized into smaller, largely uncoordinated organizations capable of carrying out attacks in such notably lawless hotspots as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Algeria. In addition, the threat of al Qaeda grassroots cells in the West with the limited capability of pulling off small-scale attacks remains, though advances by Western security agencies since 9/11 have largely hampered such groups' efforts.

A look back at Cold War terrorism

Scattered jihadist insurgencies will continue to erode stability in areas of the Middle East and South Asia for some time to come. But a larger terrorism threat is looming on the horizon, one that poses a more lethal threat to Western interests across the globe: the revival of state-sponsored terrorism.

This new phase of terrorism is developing in the context of growing state-to-state conflict between Russia and the West, for which Russian intelligence has long been preparing. Since the Russo-Georgian war in August, there have been a number of indications that Russia is looking to revive some of its Cold War contacts in places such as Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Syria, Lebanon and the Horn of Africa, among others.

Recent Russian activity in these areas invokes memories of the Cold War, when the Soviets backed numerous left-wing militant groups in third-party countries, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, Germany's Red Army Faction, Italy's Red Brigades, the Japanese Red Army, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola and dozens of others. With Soviet assistance, training camps for militant groups were set up in such places as Libya, Iraq, Syria, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. Through a Soviet ideology that emphasized the socialist perspective of class struggle, these groups were given the funds, training, weaponry and ideological ammunition to wreak havoc across the globe.

Back then, the United States lacked a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy for dealing with these state-sponsored terrorist groups. Though terrorism was rampant at that time, it was still difficult to prove the Soviet hand in many of the terrorist groups active then. (Many used a variety of pseudonyms to confuse Western intelligence agencies.) Inside the United States, the FBI handled KGB-sponsored militant activity as a purely law enforcement problem. Overseas, the CIA would work with liaison intelligence services to combat insurgent and terrorist groups and to undermine Soviet proxy regimes, attempting covert operations such as coups in Latin America. Overall, the focus was still on state-to-state conflict, not on developing a counterterrorism strategy for specific groups.

Once Soviet funding finally dried up with the fall of the U.S.S.R., the vast majority of these left-wing militant groups crumbled, and terrorism remained low on the priority list for U.S. national security - that is, until 9/11.

Learning to cope with nonstate actors

When the terrorists struck on Sept. 11, 2001, the first logical step was to take out al Qaeda's state sponsors. Going to war in Afghanistan to deprive al Qaeda of its primary state sponsor -- the Taliban regime - was a relatively easy political decision for the United States. From there, however, things got complicated.

While justifying a war in Iraq was difficult for the United States, Washington succeeded in compelling surrounding Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Libya to give their full cooperation in stamping out al Qaeda. Pakistan's security apparatus had deep relations with the very jihadists the United States was fighting, but carrying the war to a nuclear-armed Pakistan was a less attractive option than entering into a tenuous security alliance with Islamabad in hopes of eroding the jihadists' support base.

As the jihadists' list of state sponsors got shorter, the threat they posed became more diffuse. Though overall the jihadist threat had become less lethal, it had also become more difficult to

stamp out in places like London, where grassroots cells had taken root. As a result, counterterrorism agencies are still grappling with the idea of waging a battle of ideas against jihadism and devoting more military resources to stability operations to deprive these groups of their support networks.

Looking forward

While more work has to be done to further degrade the threat of jihadism, counterterrorism agencies need to anticipate a revival of state-sponsored terrorism. State sponsorship is capable of transforming a small, largely ineffective group into a serious threat. With state sponsorship, a militant group that previously was capable of only popping off trash can bombs in Manila can access difficult-to-obtain materials (such as blasting caps and explosives) via the state sponsor's diplomatic pouch. State sponsors can then train these groups to develop superior tradecraft in improvised explosive device construction for larger, deadlier attacks.

Militant groups with state backing also benefit from training in target surveillance and operational security - essential skills for avoiding scrutiny from hostile intelligence agencies. For militants always on the run, state sponsorship can provide a group with havens for planning and training purposes. Finally, state sponsors can prove essential in giving logistical support to militants who need funding and travel documents to move around with greater ease.

But having a state sponsor can also place limits on militants. A state sponsor is more likely to keep tabs on the activities of its militant proxies, keeping such things as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) out of militant hands for fear of attacks on the sponsor's own soil. With a state sponsor, a militant group will have less autonomy and thus less inclination to acquire nonconventional weapons. By contrast, more autonomous nonstate actors like al Qaeda are more likely to work to acquire WMDs - though their chance of success remains low.

The Russian agenda

Russia is not the great power it was during the Cold War, but Moscow plans to reassert Russian prowess vis-a-vis the West, particularly as the U.S. military is still bogged down in fighting the jihadist war. The Russia of today is not constrained by the need to wage an ideological war in the name of communism. Instead, potential Russian covert activity in regions such as Latin America, the Middle East and Africa would be focused more on generating chaos, thereby creating enough headaches for the West to keep the United States preoccupied while Russia works on consolidating its influence along the former Soviet periphery. To this end, disaffected Palestinian groups, beaten-down Kurdish militants in Turkey, Bolivarian Leftist movements across Latin America and separatist movements in Africa are all fair game for the Russians.

While the world has seen better economic days, the Russians still have ample petrodollars to support terrorist campaigns in parts of the world where Moscow has a strategic interest in undermining the West. Terrorism, relatively speaking, is cheap. For example, the FBI estimates that the 9/11 attacks only cost al Qaeda between \$175,000 and \$250,000 for flight training, travel and other expenses for the hijackers. The Russians, who have long been deep in the

global arms trade, could even potentially turn a profit via arms sales to rebel groups in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

The extent to which Russia would re-engage in such terrorist campaigns depends on a number of factors, including the potential risk versus opportunity in supporting certain groups, the resources of the Russian SVR, the amount Russia is willing to invest in terrorism campaigns and the geographical areas where the Russians are more likely to find cooperative allies. For example, Russia has complex relations with Israel and Turkey to worry about, and it is now more or less lacking a Libya equivalent to export a terrorist agenda in the Middle East.

Latin America, in contrast, offers a much lower risk opportunity for the Russians to sow instability in the U.S. backyard. The potential revival of Russian state-sponsored terrorism is most likely still early in its development. But one should not forget that after the Cold War, many experts proclaimed a "New World Order" in which terrorism had become a thing of the past - and U.S. intelligence capabilities atrophied as a result. About a decade later, the 9/11 attacks caught the United States off guard and brought into being a new era of Islamist terrorism that is only now declining.

With state-sponsored terrorism back on the horizon, the time has come to recognize the changing face of terrorism beyond the post-9/11 world.

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