

The Never-ending Terror Threat

For a decade now, the American people have been told that only a “long war” against Islamist extremism can keep them safe from terrorism, even at the cost of trillions of dollars and loss of their liberties. Not even the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden changed the tune, says Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Now that the big kahuna, Osama bin Laden, has been killed, the “War on Terror” is much less exciting.

Even before Osama’s demise, experts sent chills through the massive post-9/11 U.S. government anti-terrorism bureaucracies by concluding that the threat from al-Qaeda had been much weakened by the group’s own bloody excesses against civilians, many of whom were Muslims.

Yet the way government works, every agency needs a threat to hype to keep the cash flowing in from scared taxpayers. So the anti-terrorism agencies need to keep the threat, however declining, fresh in the public mind and publicize their efforts to successfully combat the danger.

Recently, two incidents illustrate the extent of the government’s refrain that the “terrorists are (still) coming, the terrorists are (still) coming!”

As the public has tired of drawn-out, muddled and costly (in blood and treasure) counterinsurgency wars in faraway places that seem to have only a tangential relationship to battling insidious terrorists, technology has ridden to the rescue.

Now any U.S. president can kill potential terrorists with pilotless drone aircraft much more cheaply and without casualties from putting troops on the ground. For example, the U.S. is using such technology in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen to take out alleged Islamic terrorists.

Recently, an American drone successfully assassinated Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S. citizen who spoke fluent English and was inspiring Islamist militants with charismatic speeches. U.S. authorities also made vague allegations that he was operationally involved in the BVD (underwear) bombing and a plot to blow cardboard boxes on cargo planes out of the sky.

Even disregarding the obvious problem of what legal authority the United States used to justify violating the Fifth Amendment’s prohibition on taking life, liberty or property without due process, the Justice Department’s legal memo

justifying Awlaki's killing is classified, and Awlaki doesn't seem to be covered by the post-9/11 authorization for war, which only approved military action against those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks or harbored the attackers, the U.S. government clearly hyped the threat that Awlaki posed.

Awlaki was little known in the Middle East, and one knowledgeable scholar termed him "a-dime-a-dozen cleric." Thus, his importance to the war on terror was largely a creation of the American government and media.

Seeing the opportunity for some free publicity, what terrorists crave, al-Qaeda then pushed Awlaki further into the manufactured limelight.

And now that the U.S. has made him a martyr by assassinating him on the basis of secret criteria, vague allegations, and no due process, the State Department had to put out a worldwide travel alert to American citizens warning of retaliatory attacks to avenge Awlaki's death.

Also as part of the post-9/11 terrorism hype, the government has created a terrorist watch list containing 420,000 names, with no public disclosure of the criteria used to put that many people on it and no due process for such persons to answer the allegations. If only a fraction of that massive and wildly inflated list is trying to do harm to the United States, we are all in trouble.

In sum, in the war on terror, the U.S. government hypes the threat to justify expanding anti-terrorism efforts and budgets, argues that war is the only means to effectively combat the inflated threat (instead of using low-key intelligence and law enforcement measures, which don't generate more terrorists by poking the hornet's nest), and creates a wider retaliatory threat by using such draconian military action.

This wider danger is used to justify the need for even harsher military action, and the action-reaction cycle escalates. In sum, the government is creating the demand for its own services; private businesses should be in awe of such ability.

And not only is the government hyping the terrorist threat, it is creating it.

Like the hapless BVD bomber, who didn't even have a bomb big enough to bring down the airliner, a graduate student the FBI recently arrested for plotting to blow up the Pentagon and U.S. Capitol with hobbyists' remote-controlled aircraft would have been foiled by the fact that the planes just couldn't carry enough explosives to do the job.

The student, a U.S. citizen, got very different treatment than Awlaki. Instead of being assassinated, he was arrested, but before that, the U.S. government

purposefully helped him. The government, in order to entrap him, gave him money and grenades, assault rifles, C-4 plastic explosives, and even the remote-controlled aircraft to carry out the attack.

Without all this money and equipment, the student would have likely been no threat at all. In fact, according to The New York Times, Carmen M. Ortiz, the U.S. attorney in Boston, admitted, "The public was never in danger from the explosive devices."

This is not an isolated case. In similar cases, the FBI has provided the means to carry out terrorist attacks but then arrested the alleged plotter. Such entrapment provides opportunities for people to do what they otherwise would not or could not do.

And Muslims have complained that the FBI is targeting their community with such "gotcha" tactics.

Such governmental hyping of the terrorist threat, or actual creation of it, to justify greater federal coercive action makes one wonder whether to fear more the low probability of a successful terrorist attack or the massive, expensive and intrusive government efforts to combat it.

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