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Is There a Winner?

Ten Years after the Terror Attacks in the United States

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The forthcoming tenth anniversary of the terror attacks in the United States will presumably be a cause for celebration for al-Qaeda and its affiliates in the international jihad movement. We can expect them to mark the date with propaganda and self-adulation in order to express what they see as their great victory over the United States superpower, which they deem an occupying coalition that suppresses and humiliates the Muslim world, of which they are authentic representatives.

In contrast, senior US officials have issued pronouncements and assessments regarding al-Qaeda's imminent demise. This outlook is based on America's success in killing senior al-Qaeda commanders, led by Osama Bin Laden, and on the string of uprisings in the Arab world. In the view of American and other commentators throughout the world, the uprisings are an expression of the failure of Salafist ideology and the appeal of the violence offered by al-Qaeda as a remedy for the troubles of Muslims worldwide. These contrasting claims of victory in the battle over the past decade should be examined carefully, in an attempt to assess where the battle in the coming decade is headed.

Al-Qaeda's claim to victory is predicated on a number of factors. First, the terror attacks that it launched brought about American entanglement in two wars for which the United States has paid, and continues to pay, in blood and treasure: more than 4,000 soldiers killed and some 3,000 victims of the September 2001 attacks; some 30,000 wounded from coalition member states in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (beyond the tens of thousands of local people killed in the countries where the fighting is taking place); and the financial cost of military and defense expenditures, which ranges, according to various estimates, from \$3-5 trillion. These are massive expenses, particularly without the successful vanquishing of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Second, al-Qaeda has succeeded in damaging the image of the United States – the only superpower in the post-Cold War era – as invincible, both among friendly states in the West and among many in the Muslim world, who perceive it as an entity hostile to their religion. Third, in spite of the intensive attack

by the United States and its allies on al-Qaeda, the organization has succeeded in surviving for over twenty years, including in the decade following the terror attacks on the United States, while maintaining its offensive capabilities, exemplified by attempts at terrorist attacks in various countries around the world, including in the West. Fourth, the organization has succeeded in instilling both awareness of the serious potential threat of terrorism and the sense of insecurity in various countries. It has made life difficult for many civilians, especially in air travel and transportation, because of the need for strict security arrangements in public places.

In contrast, the claim by senior US administration officials that al-Qaeda is on the verge of elimination as an active organization is based on the fact that many of al-Qaeda's senior commanders have been arrested or killed during the past decade and especially in recent years, a result of the campaign of targeted killings around the world and in Pakistan in particular. The policy of targeted killings has proven itself as one of the most effective tools in the war on terror. It is possible that if the United States had undertaken this policy with the same intensity and precision for a number of years immediately after the September 11 attacks and had not diverted resources and the attention of civilian and military leaders to the Iraqi theater, it would have made faster and more effective progress in the war against al-Qaeda and worldwide jihad.

In addition, the uprisings in the various countries of the Arab world, which were carried out relatively non-violently and negate the path preached by al-Qaeda, caused many people to believe that the Arab spring constituted a death blow to the organization and its ideology. Consequently, the United States and its allies can note with satisfaction that over the last decade, they have prevented al-Qaeda and its affiliates from realizing attempts to carry out strategic terror attacks like those of September 11, and that cooperation between many states – sometimes even hostile states – has been greatly strengthened in preemptive activity against global jihad elements, both in operational intelligence and in extradition, legal proceedings, and prevention.

Thus at the start of the second decade after the 9/11 terror attacks, the two camps continue to confront one other and prepare to continue their battle. The main challenge faced today by Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, Bin Laden's successor, is ensuring the survival and cohesion of the organization and maintaining the preeminence that al-Qaeda has enjoyed among worldwide jihad elements. It is likely that Zawahiri will attempt to achieve this through showcase terror attacks against prominent targets in the West. He will also likely strive to capitalize on the achievements gleaned from the uprisings in the Arab world – which led to the removal of Arab governments hostile to al-Qaeda such as in Egypt and Tunisia, almost certainly to be joined by Libya – in order to establish an infrastructure and recruit new cadres. In its effort to prove that its struggle continues in spite of the demise of its

mythological leader, al-Qaeda is expected to rely on its cadre of surviving veteran commanders and a new generation of commanders that has joined its ranks, trained for fighting and terrorist activity during combat alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will also likely be assisted by its affiliates in al-Qaeda in the Hijaz, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, al-Qaeda in Iraq, and affiliated organizations in Africa and Asia.

In spite of the optimism voiced recently in Washington, the struggle against al-Qaeda and its global jihad affiliates is not over. The sense of relief at the killing of Bin Laden, the man who more than anything symbolized the terrorist threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates, will likely prove premature. To eliminate the threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the international coalition that has come together to provide a response to worldwide jihad terrorism must continue tirelessly on a systematic campaign to kill those in al-Qaeda's chain of command; neutralize the leadership of its affiliated organizations through targeted killings by the governments in states in which they operate; and thwart and arrest the foreign activists who were trained by them in the states to which they were sent. At the same time, it must improve the effectiveness of its confrontation with the violent message disseminated by the organization and bequeathed to its operatives, affiliates, and sympathizers. It is only an integration of the operational intelligence battle with the ideological battle against global jihad elements that may ultimately lead to the elimination of this infectious problem before another decade elapses.

