



## Defining Victory to Win a War

After nearly a decade of war in Afghanistan, the United States has still not defined what it considers success. It needs to do so -- and here's how.

BY DAVID AXE, MALOU INNOCENT, JASON REICH | OCTOBER 6, 2009



After nearly a decade at war in Afghanistan, the United States still has not defined the terms of the conflict. Seven months after President Barack Obama's administration released its wide-ranging strategic review of the war, basic questions remain. Who is the enemy? What are the objectives? Is counterinsurgency meant to achieve the goal of counterterrorism (beating al Qaeda), state-building (bringing stability and democracy to Afghanistan), or both? What would "victory" in Afghanistan even look like? And how will the war stay won, after the United States leaves?

Without knowing the answers to such questions, the United States has no way of determining whether it is succeeding. And as long as it continues to conflate military and state-building objectives, the United States will always appear to be losing. But by focusing on stamping out al Qaeda with a light military footprint and accepting an Islamist government in Afghanistan, the United States has an opportunity for unqualified success.

Indeed, by most military standards, the United States has already achieved numerous victories. In early October 2001, a small number of U.S. personnel working in tandem with sympathetic Afghans punished al Qaeda and the Taliban regime that harbored the terrorist group. Although it hasn't met its goal of capturing Osama bin Laden, the United States has still seriously degraded al Qaeda's global capabilities -- a major win.

But perceptions have lagged behind reality. Many U.S. policymakers, defense officials, and prominent opinion leaders still tend to lump al Qaeda (a loose, transnational jihadist network responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks) together with the Taliban (an indigenous Pashtun-dominated movement with no shadowy global mission). Because of this conflation, the suppression of al Qaeda is not seen as the victory it is -- and disproportionate focus is placed on suppressing the Taliban.

However, the Taliban and other parochial fighters, such as the Haqqani network, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami group, and other indigenous Pashtun militants, pose little threat to the sovereignty or physical security of the United States. Therefore, waging a counterinsurgency campaign against these militants is not a pressing national security interest. In fact, the effect of prolonging the large-scale U.S. military presence and artificially expanding the number of enemies risks uniting these otherwise irrelevant guerrilla groups against the United States.

An Islamist regime such as the Taliban -- if it can be encouraged to moderate its more militant fringes -- can be an acceptable U.S. ally. Consider Somalia, a country where Washington once also conflated al Qaeda with a local nationalist regime. In 2006, Somalia's moderate Islamic Courts Union (ICU) expanded from its bases in the capital, Mogadishu, to command most of southern and central Somalia. Although the ICU's enforcement of *sharia* law made some Western observers uncomfortable, the regime's widespread public support and effective governance meant it was in fact the best chance for lasting stability that Somalia had had in decades.

But George W. Bush's administration didn't see things that way. A handful of al Qaeda operatives had sought refuge in remote Somali villages, and in response, the U.S. military launched several raids, killing at least two of the operatives. Under Bush, Washington seemed incapable of viewing the ICU separately from these al Qaeda refugees. Defeating terrorism in Somalia also meant destroying the ICU. In retrospect, it seems that the Bush administration sacrificed an opportunity for peace in Somalia on the altar of the war on terrorism. In December 2006, Washington provided key logistical, military, and diplomatic support to neighboring Ethiopia as that country launched a mechanized invasion of Somalia that briefly unseated the ICU and resulted in a bloody, two-year war -- a war that did nothing to boost anti-al Qaeda operations. In fact, the disastrous, U.S.-supported invasion only stoked anti-Western sentiment in Somalia and empowered the country's major insurgent group, al-Shabab.

In time, the ICU and other insurgent groups fought off the Ethiopians. The resurgent ICU subsequently subsumed a U.S.-backed secular "transitional government" this January. The ICU is now back in charge in Somalia, albeit under the transitional government's name, and has regained some of the momentum it had before the Ethiopian invasion.

The Obama administration has reversed Bush's policy and now embraces the ICU's moderate brand of non-democratic, Islamist government. It is, after all, what most Somalis want. And the relaxed relationship between the two countries has only made counterterrorism easier. In early September, a U.S. strike killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an al Qaeda agent suspected of orchestrating the 2002 bombing of a Kenyan hotel, who was hiding in Somalia at the time. The ICU was mute about the whole incident -- as close to an official approval as one can expect.

Somalia's lesson for Afghanistan is that regime change, and democracy, are not necessary for counterterrorism. Propping up President Hamid Karzai's Western-style government in Kabul does not make operations against al Qaeda any easier or more successful. If anything, it distracts from the conceptually simpler task of finding and killing terrorists.

Without U.S. and NATO protection, Karzai's regime would, sooner or later, probably fall to the Taliban. But U.S. observers should not equate that eventuality with "losing" the war. The war is against terrorists, not Islamist governments. The United States should be prepared to make peace, and amends, with a resurgent Taliban -- and to encourage the group to excise its more extreme elements. As Somalia demonstrates, Islamist governments can be greatly encouraged to reform their extremist fringes, rendering these regimes no more amenable to terrorist groups than any other country.

U.S. military operations against al Qaeda, still clinging to life in Afghanistan, could continue. In fact, the blueprints for an effective counterterrorism approach have already been drafted from the initial U.S. invasion in 2001. Small Special Forces teams working in conjunction with local militias can assemble quickly, move with ease through the difficult terrain, and strike effectively and cheaply at "real" enemies whenever they raise their profile.

Such small-scale operations, making use of Special Forces and other covert means, as well as the CIA and FBI's close cooperation with foreign law enforcement and intelligence agencies, have lead to the greatest successes scored against al Qaeda since 9/11 -- the snatch-and-grab operations that netted Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the principal architect of 9/11, and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, the support interface between the 9/11 operatives and al Qaeda.

Instead of increasing troops, then, the United States should scale back its military presence and adopt more limited objectives. Rather than trying to protect Afghan villages from the Taliban, the United States should concentrate on dismantling al Qaeda cells in Pakistan through discrete operations, promoting intelligence sharing and collection, and committing to surgical missile strikes when necessary.

Over the past eight years, the United States has confused an operational doctrine -- population-centric counterinsurgency -- with the strategic goal of keeping the country safe. But the strategic objective of protecting the United States from terrorism should define its operational methods, not the reverse.

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