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Al-Qaeda's Rope-a-Dope

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AL-QAEDA'S ROPE-A-DOPE

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

Any evaluation of the first decade of the global War on Terror (or whatever phrase *du jour* is currently used to describe the conflict) cannot avoid an unmistakable triumph: America hasn't suffered another catastrophic act of terrorism since September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, the U.S.'s success in defending itself against the tactic of terrorism has not been complemented by a deep understanding of its enemies' strategy, and consequently its systems of offense and defense have not been structured for victory.

The lack of attention the U.S. has paid to al-Qaeda's strategy so far is remarkable. To comprehend the shallowness of its understanding, one need look no further than the documents that frame official U.S. thinking about terrorism. For example, the *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism* (NMSP-WOT)—the most comprehensive military plan for the fight against al-Qaeda and its affiliates—outlines *America's* ends, ways, and means in the conflict, but doesn't perform the same analysis for al-Qaeda. This is striking, because understanding an enemy's ends, ways, and means is fundamental to military strategy.

Likewise, neither the White House's *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* nor the *9/11 Commission Report* performs an ends, ways, and means analysis of the *jihadi* group. These vital documents typically discuss al-Qaeda's goal of re-establishing the caliphate and its tactic of terrorism, with an unresolved disconnect between this goal and the group's tactics. It appears that planners assumed that al-Qaeda did not think strategically, an unwarranted assumption.

An interesting academic article published in *International Security* a few months before the 9/11 attacks provides a good way to conceptualize the fight against al-Qaeda. Written by Ivan

Arreguín-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars” began with an extended look at the famed “rumble in the jungle” boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire, in 1974. Foreman, “the strongest, hardest hitting boxer of his generation,” was heavily favored—but was defeated by Ali’s “rope-a-dope” strategy, which turned Foreman’s strength against him.

“Ali appeared to cower against the ropes,” Arreguín-Toft recounted. “Foreman, now confident of victory, pounded him again and again, while Ali whispered hoarse taunts... Foreman lost his temper, and his punches became a furious blur. To spectators, unaware that the elastic ring ropes were absorbing much of the force of Foreman’s blows, it looked as if Ali would surely fall.” Yet because the ropes absorbed the blows, Foreman’s attacks only succeeded in tiring him, and Ali pulled off an upset by knocking out his exhausted opponent in the eighth round.

This is how a relatively small and weak actor, like al-Qaeda, can beat a strong actor like the U.S.: by turning its strength against it. While al-Qaeda hasn’t fully replicated Muhammad Ali’s successful strategy, it has managed to put the U.S. in a position where many of its offensive and defensive measures do in fact serve to make America more vulnerable by exhausting it.

An examination of the evolution of al-Qaeda’s strategy for undermining the U.S. economy is instructive. (A key facet of al-Qaeda’s anti-American warfare has always been economic.) Its initial phase linked terrorist attacks directly to economic harm. A prime example is the September 11th attacks, in which a major economic target (the World Trade Center) was destroyed. It’s clear that 9/11 was intended to create a serious economic setback for the U.S. In an interview conducted by *Al Jazeera’s* Taysir Allouni in October 2001, Bin Laden spoke at length about the extent of the economic damage the attacks inflicted: this economic harm was in fact the first accomplishment to which he pointed.

A second identifiable phase in this strategy can be called the “bleed-until-bankruptcy” plan. Bin Laden first used this phrase in October 2004, when he made clear that al-Qaeda sought to embroil the U.S. and its allies in draining wars in the Muslim world, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another step in this strategy targeted the oil supply: Bin Laden exhorted his followers to attack oil targets, and new al-Qaeda head Ayman al-Zawahiri has similarly advocated for this. *Jihadis* have responded by attacking oil targets in countries that include Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

But after the collapse of the U.S. economy in September 2008, *jihadi* warfare entered a new period that can be called its “strategy of a thousand cuts” phase. An overarching reason for this shift is that America now appears mortal. According to *Inspire*, the English-language online magazine of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the gist of this strategy has been to perpetrate “smaller, but more frequent” attacks.

The cover of the November 2010 issue of *Inspire* features a photo of a UPS plane and the headline “\$4,200.” That pithy headline provides deep insight into the direction that al-Qaeda’s strategy has taken, referring to the disparity between the cost of executing terrorist attacks and the cost to Western countries of defending themselves. “\$4,200” refers to what it cost AQAP to execute a cartridge-bomb plot in October 2010, in which PETN-based bombs were placed on FedEx and UPS planes. Even though no planes were brought down, the plot will cost Western countries far more than it cost al-Qaeda, as these countries attempt to prevent terrorists from successfully destroying planes in the future through similar measures.

In *Inspire*, radical Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki explains that AQAP settled on attacking cargo planes because the *jihadis*’ foes would be faced with a dilemma once AQAP placed bombs on these planes. “You either spend billions of dollars to inspect each and every package in the world,” he wrote, “or you do nothing and we keep trying again.” Awlaki further explained, “The air freight is a multi-billion dollar industry. FedEx alone flies a fleet of 600 aircraft and ships an average of four million packages per day. It is a huge worldwide industry. For the trade between North America and Europe, air cargo is indispensable and to be able to force the West to install stringent security measures sufficient enough to stop our explosive devices would add a heavy economic burden to an already faltering economy.”

Inspire also explains that large-scale attacks, such as those of 9/11, are in its view no longer required to defeat the United States. “To bring down America we do not need to strike big,” it claims. “In such an environment of security phobia that is sweeping America, it is more feasible to stage smaller attacks that involve less players and less time to launch and thus we may circumvent the security barriers America worked so hard to erect.” (Al-Qaeda, however, has not abandoned catastrophic attacks entirely: its attempt to execute multiple Mumbai-style urban warfare attacks in Europe in late 2010 shows that these efforts continue.) The Foreman-Ali analogy is apt: al-Qaeda thinks it is turning the U.S.’s strength against it, envisioning the

elevated security spending exhausting America and making it more vulnerable.

The fundamental problem with the U.S.'s system of homeland defense is that it has been structured in an expensive manner from top to bottom. One striking example is the U.S.'s hesitance to embrace a system of terrorist profiling (most notably in airports), which produces inefficiencies. As Sheldon Jacobson, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign computer science professor who has studied aviation security since 1996, has noted: "Spending billions of dollars on screening the wrong people uses up finite resources. If we keep focusing on stopping terrorist tactics rather than stopping the terrorists themselves, the aviation security system will never reach an acceptable level of security."

The problem is that if we simply slash our national security spending without making our system of defending against the terrorist threat more efficient and effective, we'll end up less safe. Thus, a critical challenge the U.S. now faces is improving the efficacy of the system, even as it reduces its expenditures in an effort to escape from al-Qaeda's rope-a-dope.

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