Towards a Fiscally and Politically Solvent Counterterrorism Strategy

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Helene Cooper and Mark Landler of the New York Times recently reported on the shifting focus of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan toward targeted killings to create strategic leverage, rather than the counterinsurgency campaign some had envisioned. This is a good thing.

In the years following September 11th, observers of the growing trend of radicalization among poor, disenfranchised Muslim populations began talking about the problem of "ungoverned spaces." It was in the chaos of ungoverned spaces--states or parts of states without effective law and order, services or other observable governance--that non-state actors such as al-Qa'ida could set up shop and thrive, recruiting from the local environment and bringing like-minded friends in from abroad to set up camp. Without harassment from local law enforcement, extremist were then free to use the ungoverned spaces as a launching pad for attacks in the U.S. homeland. To counteract such possibilities, ungoverned spaces must be tamed and safe havens of this nature made unsafe to extremists.

Shortly after "ungoverned spaces" became a beltway buzzword, long neglected counter-insurgency strategy (COIN) began being viewed as the doctrinal savior of increasingly violent resistance in Iraq. As the situation evolved into bloody internecine conflict, increasing calls for implementation of COIN strategy were heard from think-tanks, editorialists and the DC chattering class. General David Petraeus, fresh from rewriting COIN doctrine for the Army, in effect made Iraq a proof of concept for COIN doctrine. As violence levels dropped in Iraq, the presumed lesson learned was that when confronted with problems of ungoverned spaces, the proper doctrinal response was a COIN operation.

While such a conclusion has merit, COIN operations are tremendously costly. In terms of
personnel, one counter-insurgent per fifty persons in the population is considered a minimum force for effective COIN (this would suggest that nearly 700,000 troops are needed to secure Afghanistan). Many insurgents have economic motivations, requiring significant outlays of development assistance. This is further complicated by the vast array of ungoverned spaces where extremists might seek refuge—places like Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, the Sudan, Gaza, Aceh and Kashmir to name just a handful.

The Unites States budget deficit now checks in at $13 trillion. The conflict in Iraq runs an estimated $720 million each day while the effort in Afghanistan has been estimated at $82 million per day. Though the buzzwords of ungoverned spaces and COIN have been thrown about less frequently by the current administration, the concepts still clearly inform the debate—yet they are costly in blood and treasure. Examination of intransigent insurgencies such as the Kurdistan Workers Party, The Shining Path and Chechen/North Caucasuses groups should demonstrate the long term challenge of defeating such movements. We do well to remember that many analysts attribute the fiscal collapse of the Soviet Union to overextension in their own Afghan occupation. The United States cannot afford such costly long term commitments.

The problem with focusing on ungoverned spaces is that it only really addresses part of the problem. 9/11 conspirators planned their operation from Germany and the United States as well as Afghanistan, and plots on the homeland in recent years are as likely to involve homegrown extremists as not. Dumping money and personnel resources into ungoverned spaces and COIN approaches will not address those problems. Rather, counter-radicalization and early detection are the more cost-efficient and effective alternatives. An honest assessment of threats emanating from ungoverned spaces find few that threaten U.S. national security interests; those that do can be handled through more traditional approaches. The shift back towards an intelligence/law enforcement/special operations approach towards counterterrorism is needful. It is far more cost effective to continue to pick off al-Qa’ida’s ”#3” operational planner, than to secure Helmand province.

As Americans we would love to be able to build-up Jeffersonian democracies in the waste-places we are confronted with, but unfortunately, such an effort is beyond our reach. Where national partner governments recognize the need for technical assistance, the U.S. should be prepared to dispatch key advisors to aid in development of governance and security capabilities, but this type of response in is far less than what is envisioned by COIN doctrine. The shifting approach toward targeted killings is welcome and essential for development of a fiscally and political solvent approach to counterterrorism.