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Another One Bites the Dust

■ Last week Abu Laith al-Libi, a senior al Qaeda leader responsible for military operations inside Afghanistan, was killed by a U.S. missile strike in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. In the May/June 2007 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, longtime CIA official Bruce Riedel explained how al Qaeda has managed to reconstitute itself as a dangerous force after nearly being destroyed during the winter of 2001-2. If Laith al-Libi's survival was an example of the continuing challenge the terrorist group posed, his elimination is a small step toward dealing with it — a step that needs to be followed up not only by further combat, but also further struggle in the war of ideas.

Al Qaeda Strikes Back

[Bruce Riedel](#)

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Summary: By rushing into Iraq instead of finishing off the hunt for Osama bin Laden, Washington has unwittingly helped its enemies: al Qaeda has more bases, more partners, and more followers today than it did on the eve of 9/11. Now the group is working to set up networks in the Middle East and Africa -- and may even try to lure the United States into a war with Iran. Washington must focus on attacking al Qaeda's leaders and ideas and altering the local conditions in which they thrive.

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A FIERCER FOE

Al Qaeda is a more dangerous enemy today than it has ever been before. It has suffered some setbacks since September 11, 2001: losing its state within a state in Afghanistan, having several of its top operatives killed, failing in its attempts to overthrow the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. But thanks largely to Washington's eagerness to go into Iraq rather than concentrate on hunting down al Qaeda's leaders, the organization now has a solid base of operations in the badlands of Pakistan and an effective franchise in western Iraq. Its reach has spread throughout the Muslim world, where it has developed a large cadre of operatives, and in Europe, where it can claim the support of some disenfranchised Muslim locals and members of the Arab and Asian diasporas. Osama bin Laden has mounted a successful propaganda campaign to make himself and his movement the primary symbols of Islamic resistance worldwide. His ideas now attract more followers than ever.

Bin Laden's goals remain the same, as does his basic strategy. He seeks to, as he puts it, "provoke and bait" the United States into "bleeding wars" throughout the Islamic world; he wants to bankrupt the country much as he helped bankrupt, he claims, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The demoralized "far enemy" would then go home, allowing al Qaeda to focus on destroying its "near enemies," Israel and the "corrupt" regimes of Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. occupation of Iraq helped move his plan along, and bin Laden has worked hard to turn it into a trap for Washington. Now he may be scheming to extend his strategy by exploiting or even triggering a war between the United States and Iran.

Decisively defeating al Qaeda will be more difficult now than it would have been a few years ago. But it can still be done, if Washington and its partners implement a comprehensive strategy over several years, one focused on both attacking al Qaeda's leaders and ideas and altering the local conditions that allow them to thrive. Otherwise, it will only be a matter of time before al Qaeda strikes the U.S. homeland again.

ONE LOST, TWO GAINED

The al Qaeda leadership did not anticipate the rapid collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001. Up to that point, Afghanistan had been a fertile breeding ground for the organization. According to some estimates, al Qaeda had trained up to 60,000 jihadists there. Al Qaeda leaders welcomed the invasion by U.S. and coalition forces on the assumption that they would quickly get mired in conflict, as the Soviets had two decades earlier. Al Qaeda and the Taliban thought they had decapitated the Afghan opposition and severely hampered its ability to fight by assassinating the Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Masoud two days before 9/11.

But in December 2001, Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader and self-proclaimed "commander of the faithful," to whom bin Laden had sworn allegiance, lost Kandahar, the capital of the Taliban's fiefdom. The Taliban had already lost considerable support among Afghans by the time of the invasion because of their draconian implementation of fundamentalist Islamic law and their harsh crackdown on poppy cultivation, the mainstay of the Afghan economy. But the key to their defeat was the defection of Pakistan. According to Ahmed Rashid, the top expert on the Taliban, up to 60,000 Pakistani volunteers had served in the Taliban militia before 9/11, alongside dozens of active-duty Pakistani army advisers and even small Pakistani army commando units. When these experts left, the Taliban lost their conventional military capability and political patronage, and al Qaeda lost a safe haven for its operational planning, training, and propaganda efforts.

The senior members of al Qaeda and the Taliban recovered quickly. In early 2002, they hid in the badlands along the Pakistani-Afghan border. Fighters went underground, and the trail for the top three men (bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's top deputy) went cold almost immediately. For the next two years, al Qaeda focused on surviving -- and, with the Taliban, on building a new base of operations around Quetta, in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan.

Al Qaeda also moved swiftly to develop a capability in Iraq, where it had little or no presence before 9/11. (The 9/11 Commission found no credible evidence of any operational connection between al Qaeda and Iraq before the attacks, and the infamous report connecting the 9/11 mastermind Mohamed Atta with Iraqi intelligence officers in Prague has been discredited.) On February 11, 2003, bin Laden sent a letter to the Iraqi people, broadcast via the satellite network al Jazeera, warning them to prepare for the "Crusaders' war to occupy one of Islam's former capitals, loot Muslim riches, and install a stooge regime to follow its masters in Washington and Tel Aviv to pave the way for the establishment of Greater Israel." He advised Iraqis to prepare for a long struggle against invading forces and engage in "urban and street warfare" and emphasized "the importance of martyrdom operations which have inflicted unprecedented harm on America and Israel." He even encouraged the jihadists in Iraq to work with "the socialist infidels" -- the Baathists -- in a "convergence of interests."

Thousands of Arab volunteers, many of them inspired by bin Laden's words, went to Iraq in the run-up to the U.S. invasion. Some joined the fledgling network created by the longtime bin Laden associate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had fled Afghanistan and come to Iraq sometime in 2002 to begin preparations against the invasion. (Zarqawi had been a partner in al Qaeda's millennium plot to blow up the Radisson Hotel and other targets in Amman, Jordan, in December 2000. Later, in Herat, Afghanistan, he ran operations complementary to al Qaeda's.) Zarqawi's network killed an officer of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Laurence Foley, in Amman on October 28, 2002 -- the first anti-American operation connected to the invasion.

ROOT AND BRANCH

The U.S. invasion of Iraq took the pressure off al Qaeda in the Pakistani badlands and opened new doors for the group in the Middle East. It also played directly into the hands of al Qaeda leaders by seemingly confirming their claim that the United States was an imperialist force, which helped them reinforce various local alliances. In Iraq, Zarqawi adopted a two-pronged strategy to alienate U.S. allies and destabilize the country. He sought to isolate U.S. forces by driving out all other foreign forces with systematic terrorist attacks, most notably the bombings of the United Nations headquarters and the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad in the summer of 2003. More important, he focused on the fault line in Iraqi society -- the divide between Sunnis and Shiites -- with the goal of precipitating a civil war. He launched a series of attacks on the Shiite leadership, holy Shiite sites, and Shiite men and women on the street. He organized the assassination of the senior leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, in the summer of 2003, and the bombings of Shiite shrines in Najaf and Baghdad in March 2004 and in Najaf and Karbala in December 2004. Even by the ruthless standards of al Qaeda, Zarqawi excelled.

Zarqawi's strategy did prompt criticism from other jihadi groups and some second-guessing within al Qaeda, but it nevertheless succeeded brilliantly. In a letter to Zarqawi dated July 9, 2005, Zawahiri questioned the wisdom of igniting Sunni-Shiite hatred in the Muslim world, and Zarqawi became known within the movement as al Gharib (the Stranger) because of his extreme views. Still, he pressed ahead, and the al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan never challenged him publicly. Although he led only a small percentage of the Sunni militants in Iraq, Zarqawi was at the cutting edge of the insurgency, the engine of the civil war. By late 2004, he had formally proclaimed his allegiance to bin Laden, and bin Laden had anointed him "the prince of al Qaeda in Iraq."

Zarqawi's group, al Qaeda in Iraq, has continued to foment sectarian unrest. In February 2006, it attacked one of the country's most sacred Shiite sites, the Golden Mosque in Samarra. Zarqawi's death last summer changed little. In October 2006, the group proclaimed the independence of a Sunni state -- "the Islamic State of Iraq" -- in Sunni-majority areas, such as Baghdad, Mosul, and Anbar Province, declaring its opposition not just to the U.S. occupation but also to the Iranian-backed Shiite region in the south and to the Kurdish region in the north (which it says is supported by Israel). Most of all, al Qaeda in Iraq has continued to orchestrate massacres against Shiites in Baghdad.

The visible success of its partners in Iraq has strengthened the hand of al Qaeda and its allies, old and new, in Pakistan. With the help of tactical advice and, probably, funds from al Qaeda, the Taliban had already regrouped by 2004. In 2005, bin Laden appeared in a Taliban video advising its commanders. By 2006, the Taliban had recovered sufficiently to launch a major offensive in Afghanistan and even attempted to retake Kandahar. New tactics imported from Iraq, such as suicide bombings and the use of improvised explosive devices, became commonplace in Afghanistan. Taliban attacks rose from 1,632 in 2005 to 5,388 in 2006, according to the U.S. military, and suicide operations grew from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006. NATO troops held on to the major towns and cities but suffered significant losses, including over 90 dead.

Al Qaeda has also developed closer ties to Kashmiri terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad. Some of those links predated 9/11. In late 1999, for example, bin Laden (as well as Taliban forces and Pakistani intelligence agents) was intimately involved in the hijacking of an Indian airliner by Kashmiri terrorists -- an operation that then Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh has since correctly described as the "dress rehearsal" for 9/11. Al Qaeda and Kashmiri groups have continued their deadly cooperation: the spectacular multiple bombings that rocked Mumbai last July had the marks of al Qaeda's modus operandi, and Indian authorities have linked them to al Qaeda's allies in Kashmir.

SPREADING THE WORD

With two new bases secured and local alliances reinforced, al Qaeda has worked to expand its reach beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. To vividly showcase its strength, al Qaeda records most of its operations and transmits the gruesome coverage to jihadi Web sites all over the world. The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the chaos that followed were a boon to al Qaeda's propaganda efforts, as they offered tangible evidence, al Qaeda's leaders could argue, both that Washington had imperialist plans and that the jihad against U.S. forces was working.

Bin Laden made a landmark video recording in October 2004, in time for the presidential election in the United States, promising to bankrupt Washington in Afghanistan and Iraq. Largely silent in 2005, he made several announcements in 2006. On the fifth anniversary of 9/11, al Qaeda released a major statement entitled "The Manhattan Raid," featuring previously unseen videos of two of the 9/11 pilots and the most extensive discussion yet on the background and purpose of the operation. Zawahiri, al Qaeda's propaganda point man -- whose role is to reassure the faithful that the movement is alive and well -- has also become more prolific; he issued at least 15 messages in 2006. Overall, al Qaeda quadrupled its output of videos between 2005 and 2006 -- all propaganda instruments, of course, but also a means for the organization's leaders to rally its followers and send them instructions. According to one expert, there are also some 4,500 overtly jihadi Web sites that disseminate the al Qaeda leadership's messages.

Al Qaeda has expanded its influence in the Middle East and Europe. It has earned much credibility in the global jihadi subculture. Its grand plans to topple the governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia have failed, but its attacks against them illustrate the growing breadth of its ambitions and its increasing reach throughout the Middle East. And thanks to the international connections that Zarqawi established, the group has been able to provide foreign foot soldiers for the war in Iraq. Dozens of them have gone -- and more continue to go -- to Iraq to join the jihad. Most of them appear to be Saudis, although exact numbers are impossible to come by. The most striking case is perhaps that of Muriel Degauque, a Belgian woman and a convert to Islam, who blew herself up in a car-bomb attack against a U.S. convoy in Iraq in November 2005. Conversely, one of the 2005 attacks in Amman involved an Iraqi woman sent by Zarqawi. And thanks to Zarqawi's pipeline, a slew of al Qaeda faithful trained in Iraq can now be sent back to their homelands as experienced fighters.

Al Qaeda's relocation to Pakistan has also provided new opportunities for the group to expand its reach in the West, especially the United Kingdom. Thanks to connections to the Pakistani diaspora, visitors from Pakistan have relatively easy access to the Pakistani community in the United Kingdom, and Pakistani-born Britons can readily travel to Pakistan and back -- facilitating recruitment, training, and communications for jihadists. (By one estimate, Pakistan received 400,000 visits from British residents in 2004.) The large communities of immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh living in the United Kingdom -- and some disaffected Muslim British citizens -- have become targets for recruitment. With entry into the United States made more difficult because of U.S. homeland security measures, the United Kingdom has become a focal point of al Qaeda's activities in the West.

In November 2006, Eliza Manningham-Buller, the director general of the British Security Service, known as MI5, said that some 200 networks of Muslims of South Asian descent were being monitored in the United Kingdom. At "the extreme end of this spectrum," Manningham-Buller said, "are resilient networks directed from al Qaeda in Pakistan," and terrorist plots in the United Kingdom "often have links back to al Qaeda in Pakistan, and through those links al Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale." Since 2001, these foot soldiers are suspected of having plotted 30 or so attacks on targets in the United Kingdom or aircraft leaving for the United States. (All but one of them have been disrupted.) These networks' most notable success was the July 7, 2005, attacks on the London public transport system. Videos later released by Zawahiri left no question that al Qaeda had sponsored the attacks.

Although links between Pakistan and other terrorist attacks in Europe are less well established, al Qaeda's influence on them is almost certain. The extent of al Qaeda's involvement in the March 11, 2004, attack on the Madrid subway is unclear, for example; the bombing may have been an independent, copycat operation. But some sources, including Abdel Bari Atwan, the well-connected editor of *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, claim it was an al Qaeda operation, and last year Zawahiri publicly counted that act as one of al Qaeda's successful "raids." There is no question, meanwhile, that al Qaeda was behind the November 2003 attacks in Istanbul against Jewish and British targets, including the British consulate, that killed or wounded over 800 people.

Al Qaeda's growing connections to Europe have made the United States more vulnerable, too. If it had not been foiled, the plot last August to destroy ten commercial airliners en route from the United Kingdom to the United States -- which has been tied back to the Pakistani-British network and was probably timed to coincide with the sixth anniversary of 9/11 -- would have been devastating. Last January, John Negroponte, then the director of national intelligence, said that the operation was the most ambitious attempt to slaughter innocents since 9/11. He told the Senate that al Qaeda's core elements "continue to plot attacks against our homeland and other targets, with the objective of inflicting mass casualties. And they are cultivating stronger operational connections and relationships that radiate outward from their leaders' secure hideout in Pakistan to affiliates throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe."

NOW WHAT?

Al Qaeda today is a global operation -- with a well-oiled propaganda machine based in Pakistan, a secondary but independent base in Iraq, and an expanding reach in Europe. Its leadership is intact. Its decentralized command-and-control structure has allowed it to survive the loss of key operatives such as Zarqawi. Its Taliban allies are making a comeback in Afghanistan, and it is certain to get a big boost there if NATO pulls out. It will also claim a victory when U.S. forces start withdrawing from Iraq. "The waves of the fierce crusader campaign against the Islamic world have broken on the rock of the mujahideen and have reached a dead end in Iraq and Afghanistan," a spokesperson for the newly proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq said on November 29, 2006. "For the first time since the fall of the Ottoman caliphate in the past century, the region is witnessing the revival of Islamic caliphates."

Whether or not such claims are true, al Qaeda is well placed to threaten global security in the near future. Because it thrives on failed and failing states, it will have opportunities to set up new operations. One appealing option may be Lebanon, where extremist Sunni groups have long operated, particularly in the country's second-largest city, Tripoli, which was controlled by a Sunni fundamentalist group during much of the 1980s, before Syria cracked down. If the Lebanese state is further weakened or civil war breaks out, al Qaeda may seek a foothold there. The United Nations force stationed in Lebanon is likely to be a target, since the jihadists consider it to be another crusading army in the Muslim world.

Gaza is another prime candidate: it is already divided between Hamas and Fatah, and there is evidence that a small al Qaeda apparatus is forming there. Israeli security sources have expressed growing alarm about this new al Qaeda presence on their doorstep. Yemen, bin Laden's ancestral homeland, may also make an appealing base. Last November, the group al Qaeda of Jihad Organization in the Land of Yemen claimed credit for attacking oil facilities in the Hadramawt region "as directed by our leader and commander Sheik Osama bin Laden ... [and in order] to target the Western economy and stop the robbery [and] the looting of Muslim resources." Bangladesh is yet another possibility. The Jihad Movement in Bangladesh was one of the original signatories of bin Laden's 1998 declaration of war on the West. Last year, as bitter feuding between the two main political parties was increasingly ripping the country apart, there were growing indications that Bangladeshi fundamentalist groups were becoming radicalized. The political meltdown now under way in the capital, Dhaka, is creating the type of fractious environment in which al Qaeda thrives.

Africa presents some opportunities, too. Somalia has been a failed state for almost two decades and has had a long history of al Qaeda activity: in November 2002, it served as the base for an attack on two Israeli tourist targets in Kenya. The Ethiopian occupation of Somalia at the beginning of the year temporarily routed the Islamists, but al Qaeda is not finished in Mogadishu. In Algeria, meanwhile, al Qaeda is trying to revive the civil war that killed over 100,000 people in the 1990s. The Algerian Islamist movement the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, known by its French initials GSPC, swore allegiance to bin Laden last year, and he ordered that the group be renamed al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. It has since attacked oil targets and police stations, hoping that a spectacular series of assaults, especially on Western targets, could reignite the civil war.

Bin Laden might also be nurturing bolder plans, such as exploiting or even triggering an all-out war between the United States and Iran. Indeed, there is evidence that al Qaeda in Iraq -- and elements of the Iraqi Sunni community -- increasingly consider Iran's influence in Iraq to be an even greater problem than the U.S. occupation. Al Qaeda worries about the Sunni minority's future in a Shiite-dominated Iraq after the Americans leave. Propaganda material of Sunni jihadists in Iraq and elsewhere openly discusses their fear that Iran will dominate a postoccupation Iraq and seek to restore the type of regional control that the Persian Empire had in the sixteenth century. In a remarkable statement last November, Zarqawi's successor, Abu Hamza al-Masri, thanked President George W. Bush for sending the U.S. Army to Iraq and thus giving al Qaeda the "great historic opportunity" to engage Americans in direct fighting on Arab ground. (He also said that Bush was "the most stupid and ominous president" in U.S. history.) But he warned that the invasion had "revived the glory of the old Persian Safavid Empire in a very short period of time." Similarly, the self-proclaimed emir of the Islamic State of Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, issued a statement in February 2007 welcoming news that the U.S. government was considering sending more troops to Iraq and saying that he was eagerly looking forward to an American nuclear attack on Iran.

A war between the "crusaders" and the "Safavids" would benefit the jihad against both groups: by pitting two of its worst enemies against each other, the Sunni Arab jihadi community would be killing two birds with one stone. Al Qaeda would especially like a full-scale U.S. invasion and occupation of Iran, which would presumably oust the Shiite regime in Tehran, further antagonize Muslims worldwide, and expand al Qaeda's battlefield against the United States so that it extends from Anbar Province in the west to the Khyber Pass in the east. It understands that the U.S. military is already too overstretched to invade Iran, but it expects Washington to use nuclear weapons. Baghdadi has told Sunnis in Iran to evacuate towns close to nuclear installations.

The biggest danger is that al Qaeda will deliberately provoke a war with a "false-flag" operation, say, a terrorist attack carried out in a way that would make it appear as though it were Iran's doing. The United States should be extremely wary of such deception. In the event of an attack, accurately assigning blame will require very careful intelligence work. It may require months, or even years, of patient investigating to identify the plotters behind well-planned and well-executed operations, as it did for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, and the 1996 attacks on the U.S. barracks at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were wise to be patient in both those cases; Washington would be well advised to do the same in the event of a similar attack in the future. In the meantime, it should, of course, continue to do its utmost to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and from fomenting violence and terrorism in the Middle East by using tough diplomacy and targeted sanctions. And it should not consider a military operation against Iran, as doing so would only strengthen al Qaeda's hand -- much as the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq have.

WAR GAMES

The challenge of defeating al Qaeda is more complex today than it was in 2001. The organization is more diffuse, and its components operate more independently. Bin Laden continues to influence its direction and provide general guidance and, on occasion, specific instructions. But overall the movement is more loosely structured, which leaves more room for independent and copycat terrorist operations.

Partly because of this evolution, Washington needs a grand strategy to defeat al Qaeda. The past five years have demonstrated that a primarily military approach will not work. The focus of Washington's new strategy must be to target al Qaeda's leaders, who provide the inspiration and direction for the global jihad. As long as they are alive and active, they will symbolize successful resistance to the United States and continue to attract new recruits. Settling for having them on the run or hiding in caves is not enough; it is a recipe for defeat, if not already an acknowledgment of failure. The death of bin Laden and his senior associates in Pakistan and Iraq would not end the movement, but it would deal al Qaeda a serious blow.

A critical first step toward decapitating al Qaeda is for Washington to enhance its commitment in Afghanistan. President Bush promised to do so last February, but more needs to be done. Defeating the resurgent Taliban will require a significant increase in NATO forces, and that will require U.S. leadership. The United States should urgently divert more troops from Iraq to Afghanistan as a way to encourage U.S. allies in Afghanistan to help supply the additional troops and equipment needed. NATO should also encourage its partners in the Mediterranean Dialogue -- especially Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia -- to contribute to the stabilization of Afghanistan. It should also create a contact group led by a senior NATO diplomat to engage with all of Afghanistan's neighbors to secure the country's borders, especially the 1,500-mile one with Pakistan. This group should include Iran, which has generally been a helpful player in Afghanistan in the last few years. NATO should reach out to India as well: New Delhi has already provided half a billion dollars in aid for Afghanistan, and, having long been a target of Islamist terrorism, India has a national interest in defeating it.

The United States should supplement this military buildup by taking the lead on a major economic reconstruction program in Afghanistan. Since 2001, the international community has delivered far less aid per capita to Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries, than it has to recovering states such as Bosnia. The country's infrastructure must be improved in order to develop a mainstream agricultural economy that can compete with illicit poppy cultivation, which breeds crime and corruption and strengthens the jihadi subculture.

The United States and its partners, including NATO, also need to take a firmer position with the Pakistani government to enlist its help in tracking down al Qaeda leaders. President Pervez Musharraf has taken some important steps against al Qaeda, especially after its attempts to assassinate him, and he has promised more than once a full crackdown on extremism. But mostly he has sought to tame jihadists -- without much success -- and his government has tolerated those who harbor bin Laden and his lieutenants, Taliban fighters and their Afghan fellow travelers, and Kashmiri terrorists. Many senior Pakistani politicians say privately that they believe Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) still has extensive links to bin Laden; some even claim it harbors him. Apprehending a few al Qaeda officers would not be enough, and so a systematic crackdown on all terrorists -- Arab, Afghan, and Kashmiri -- is critical. Hence, Pakistan should no longer be rewarded for its selective counterterrorism efforts. (Washington has already given it some \$10 billion in aid since 9/11.) The new Congress must take a sharp look at evidence (including evidence gathered by Afghan authorities) of Pakistani cooperation to assess how it can be improved.

Congress should also press the Bush administration to ensure that Pakistan holds free and fair parliamentary elections this year and that Pakistani opposition leaders are allowed to compete in them. If it makes sense to bring democracy to Afghanistan, then surely it makes sense to bring it to Pakistan. The prevailing theory that strongmen such as Musharraf make for better counterterrorism partners is a canard; Musharraf, for one, has not delivered the goods. The Pakistani army and the ISI have tolerated and sponsored terrorism for the last two decades, and the nexus between Pakistan and terrorism will not be broken until Pakistani officers are back in their barracks and civilian rule is restored.

Iraq is, of course, another critical battlefield in the fight against al Qaeda. But it is time to recognize that engagement there is more of a trap than an opportunity for the United States. Al Qaeda and Iran both want Washington to remain bogged down in the quagmire. Al Qaeda has openly welcomed the chance to fight the United States in Iraq. U.S. diplomacy has certainly been clumsy and counterproductive, but there is little point in reviewing the litany of U.S. mistakes that led to this disaster. The objective now should be to let Iraqis settle their conflicts themselves. Rather than reinforce its failures, the United States should disengage from the civil war in Iraq, with a complete, orderly, and phased troop withdrawal that allows the Iraqi government to take the credit for the pullout and so enhance its legitimacy.

No doubt al Qaeda will claim a victory when the United States leaves Iraq. (It already does so at the sheer mention of withdrawal.) But it is unlikely that the Islamic State of Iraq will fare well after the occupation ends. Anbar and adjacent Sunni provinces have little water, few other natural resources, and no access to the outside world except through hostile territory. The Shiites and the Kurdish militias will have no compunction about attacking the Islamic State of Iraq. (Al Qaeda's own propaganda indicates that it fears the Shiites' wrath after the United States' departure more than it fears what would happen if the Americans stayed.)

Another essential aspect of the United States' war against al Qaeda is the war of ideas. Washington must learn to develop more compelling narratives for its actions. Its calls for bringing democracy to Iraq have not resonated, partly because its actions have not matched its rhetoric. Human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay have even further sullied the United States' reputation and honor. Washington should emphasize the concrete steps the United States is taking to heal differences between Islam and the West and to bring peace to Palestine and Kashmir, among other areas. Creating a new narrative will probably also require bringing to Washington (and London) new leaders who are untarnished by the events of the last few years.

The repackaging effort will also have to involve concrete actions to address the issues that al Qaeda invokes to win recruits, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict but also the conflict in Kashmir. The president of the United States must get personally involved in brokering peace in both instances. In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this will not be easy, especially with Hamas in power in Gaza. But neglecting the issue is no solution either. Washington should consider various ideas for getting the opposing sides back to the negotiating table, including the Baker-Hamilton proposal calling for a new international conference. President Bush should also use the United States' enhanced relationship with India -- thanks to the nuclear deal the two countries ratified last year -- to encourage the nascent dialogue between India and Pakistan and seek an end to those states' rivalry. Such an end would make it easier for the Pakistani government to crack down on terrorist networks in Kashmir, some of which are partners of al Qaeda.

It is now fashionable to call the struggle against al Qaeda the long war. It need not be so, even though helping to rebuild Afghanistan will require a long-term commitment. Decisive actions in key arenas could bring significant results in short order, and a focused strategy could eventually destroy the al Qaeda movement. On the other hand, a failure to adjust U.S. strategy would increase the risk that al Qaeda will launch another "raid" on the United States, this time perhaps with a weapon of mass destruction. For the last several years, al Qaeda's priority has been to bleed the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. Striking on U.S. soil has been a lesser goal. If al Qaeda survives, however, sooner or later it will attack the U.S. homeland again.

The Few Setbacks

Despite its overall progress, al Qaeda has suffered several significant setbacks since 9/11, mostly in the Middle East, where it has called for toppling what it considers corrupt pro-U.S. governments. In February 2003, bin Laden wrote a now-famous sermon extolling the "band of knights," the jihadists who had attacked New York and the Pentagon on 9/11, and calling for the overthrow of all apostate leaders in the Persian Gulf -- the "Karzais [referring to Afghan President Hamid Karzai] of Riyadh, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar." In a follow-up message in December 2004, he argued that in the revolution against Saudi Arabia, then Crown Prince Abdullah (now the king), Defense Minister Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, and Bandar bin Sultan (then the Saudi ambassador to the United States) should be killed. He repeatedly urged jihadists to target the oil sector in Saudi Arabia to drive up world oil prices. According to Saudi officials, these public messages came with secret orders from bin Laden instructing cells to attack soft targets in Saudi Arabia.

The al Qaeda apparatus in the kingdom, which had been quiescent, exploded into action between 2003 and 2006 -- triggering the most serious and sustained domestic violence since the creation of modern Saudi Arabia in the early twentieth century. Targets included individual Westerners, the housing compounds of oil companies and Western firms such as the Vinnell Corporation, the Abqaiq oil processing facility (which produces 60 percent of Saudi Arabia's oil), the Ministry of the Interior, and the U.S. consulate in Jidda. Although the offensive coincided with the withdrawal of significant U.S. forces from the country, the pullout was not, as some analysts believed, bin Laden's main goal; it was merely a step toward the overthrow of the "corrupt" regimes in the Islamic world and the ultimate destruction of Israel.

But the Saudi internal security forces fought back very effectively. According to Saudi authorities, they foiled more than 25 major attacks and by the end of 2006 had killed or captured over 260 terrorists, including all but one of the 26 men on the country's most wanted list. The backbone of the al Qaeda movement in the kingdom was apparently broken. After 9/11, al Qaeda also launched an offensive in Egypt, the home country of Zawahiri, preaching the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. Hotels and tourist sites in the Sinai frequented by Israelis and Westerners were struck in October 2004 and July 2005 -- the July attacks, in Sharm al-Sheikh, killed almost a hundred people, outdoing the worst terrorist strike in Egypt up to that point (the Luxor massacre of 1997, which has also been linked to Zawahiri).

But the violence never spread beyond the Sinai; the Egyptian security apparatus kept the threat away from Cairo and the center of Egyptian political life. Terrorists and al Qaeda sympathizers are almost certainly present in the Sinai today, but they do not threaten the regime. More plots should be expected, however, as Zawahiri has announced a new alliance between al Qaeda and an Egyptian Islamic group led by the brother of Khalid al-Islambuli, the assassin of President Anwar al-Sadat.

Like bin Laden and Zawahiri, Zarqawi tried -- and failed -- to overthrow the leader of his home country, King Abdullah of Jordan. The Jordanian security forces foiled most of his plots. A plan to strike the headquarters of the General Intelligence Department, in Amman, with a chemical bomb in April 2004 -- Zarqawi's most ambitious effort in Jordan -- ended with the GID seizing trucks with over 20 tons of chemical explosives. (Zarqawi took credit for the plot but claimed that the Jordanian authorities fabricated the presence of chemical weapons; as he put it, if his group possessed such a device, "we would not hesitate one second to use it on Israeli cities.") Al Qaeda was also responsible for the November 2005 bombing of the Radisson and two other hotels in Amman.

In Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, the governments have strengthened the secret police and given them carte blanche to strike al Qaeda and its sympathizers. The United States and its allies in Europe have also provided additional counterterrorism assistance to the targeted regimes and stepped up cooperation with their security forces. The lesson is clear: al Qaeda is still too weak to overthrow established governments equipped with effective security services; it needs failed states to thrive.