

## HSPI Commentary Series

### BEYOND BENGHAZI: A POWERFUL NEW COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY?

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As the Arab spring gives way to another winter, and hope continues to recede into uncertainty and challenge, many observers are asking how do we best move ahead? Bringing to justice the perpetrators of the attacks in Benghazi would certainly be a good start, but it is not enough. The United States has important interests at stake and thus requires a strategy that will mitigate the possibility, or at least the effects, of the next Benghazi.

Back in February 2011, as change swept through the Arab world, we [wrote](#) that this tumult may bring to countries in the region, as well as to the United States, both “a unique window of vulnerability” and a “concomitant window of opportunity.” For the United States, that vulnerability followed from the short-term disruption, and the unclear future in the longer run, of cooperative bilateral counterterrorism partnerships upon which critical intelligence coverage of the region was partly based; and the possibility of jihadist forces exploiting that gap as well as the broader instability generated by the transition and the ascendancy of Islamist forces. Going against the grain (the bulk of which commentary was buoyant) we further suggested that “U.S. officials at home and abroad would be well-advised to think creatively about where the next blind spot may be,” and we proposed that the time was ripe to “redouble and escalate our efforts against [the jihadists], by ramping up the counterterrorism pressure and other means in our arsenal, to hit them hard while they are already off balance.”

In the eighteen months or so that followed, many observers concluded that al Qaeda and its ilk were back on their heels, largely defeated, and thus it was time to redirect U.S. energy and resources elsewhere. Today, “core” al Qaeda, meaning its Senior Leadership, is assuredly a shell of its former self. But al Qaeda’s franchises, their affiliates, and likeminded groups live on and thrive, inspired and reinforced by the toxic ideology that bin Laden himself espoused and propounded to advantage—and which now circulates and spreads independently, around the globe. Consider Africa, where even “the Never Never Land” of Timbuktu, for so long the shorthand for the faraway and inaccessible, is in play. From coast to coast, west to east (and extending on into the Middle

East), a swath of the African continent has fallen into the hands of jihadists who, increasingly, are working together—think Ansar al-Din in Mali, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa, and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. Nature abhors a vacuum, and these ungoverned and under-governed spaces have provided fertile ground for jihadists to regroup and make new gains.

Similarly, in transition states such as Libya and conflict zones such as Syria, indigenous and foreign terrorist forces can, and have, leveraged prevailing vulnerabilities and chaos to their own ends and benefit. Against this background, complacency is dangerous. The same holds true within the United States, where more than fifty homegrown jihadi terrorism plots have been discovered since 9/11. New York City Police Department Commissioner Raymond Kelly [made the point](#) when discussing the recent arrest of a Bangladeshi national (living in Queens) for allegedly plotting to blow up the Federal Reserve Bank of New York: “After 11 years without a successful attack, it’s understandable if the public becomes complacent. But that’s a luxury law enforcement can’t afford.”

Complacency would be all the more dangerous as our adversaries’ tactics and strategies continue to evolve. In Benghazi, for instance, the attackers adopted [swarm tactics](#) to achieve strategic effect, and defeat and destroy their U.S. targets. Pulling a page from Chinese despot Chairman Mao’s handbook on guerilla warfare, well-armed small groups took the offensive on multiple fronts simultaneously, overwhelming and surprising those charged with response and counter-measures. This tactic and technique, while [not new](#), is effective—and we should adapt and adopt components into U.S. operations and strategy.

From the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, to Somalia and the Sahel, to the Maghreb and the Middle East, violent extremists have skillfully manipulated local grievances, and gained traction and support. While we must continue to pursue the leadership of terrorist groups, it remains true that when counterterrorism measures succeed in one spot, the problem simply gravitates elsewhere. Whatever the analogy (like a game of whack-a-mole or squeezing a balloon) the upshot is the same: safe, or at least safer, haven can be found in a different spot. But what if the pressure was applied in multiple sanctuaries all at once, through concerted simultaneous actions? There would be nowhere sufficiently hospitable for the adversary to exhale and recharge. The idea is to destroy their nests by overwhelming the occupants, thereby squeezing the adversary at its source-points and depriving it of oxygen.

This would not be easy. Clearly the United States cannot take on all foes, everywhere, at one time. What could be crafted and executed, though, is a careful strategy to strike simultaneously—in multiple domains (geographic and cyber)—at the heart of several festering reservoirs of al Qaeda, or al Qaeda-inspired, behavior and action. Just as U.S. drones have been used as a form of suppressive fire, designed to keep adversaries looking over their shoulders, and preventing them from directing



their efforts and energies against the United States, so too a swarm strategy could serve to preoccupy and help de-fang those who wish to do this country and its interests harm. In challenging economic times such as this, we need to work more smartly than ever, since there is no money to burn. Small groups of special operators, fanning out in one fell swoop, would not break the bank—but could break the spine of the adversary. It's worth a try.

Benghazi represented neither the beginning nor the end of the challenge. These attacks are symptomatic of a broader contest with an adaptive adversary that is ready and willing to murder U.S. citizens. We would do well to think through how best to prevent and prepare for such eventualities. Concerted simultaneous action in multiple domains that draws upon Joint Special Operations Command together with CIA and other U.S. and allied assets could create the swarm that helps stop the next storm.

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