Final Draft Combat Strategy

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Final Draft Combat Strategy – Countering Al Qaida on a National Basis

The purpose of this paper is to outline an overall strategy to defend the United States (US) against Al Qaida and its affiliates. The paper gives a brief overview of Al Qaida, discussing various aspects of Al Qaida's history, ideology, organization, goals, strategies and tactics. The paper then describes an architecture by which to defend the United States from Al Qaida attack; namely, the paper utilizes a strategic framework of *Deter, Detect, Delay, Deny, and Defeat,* ("five D, or 5D"). The paper also acknowledges that some of the proposed solutions may apply to a broader anti-terrorism and counterterrorism effort.

The paper acknowledges the roles that various disciplines play in the overall counterterrorism effort; activities carried out by the military, intelligence agencies, law enforcement, fire service, emergency medical services, private security, and political entities all play significant parts in the 5D strategy. The paper seeks to describe the roles of the various agencies and entities before, during, and after a terrorist event. Toward that end, the paper makes effort to identify how each of the "5D" aspects can be employed before and/or after a terrorist event; where a "5D" aspect can be employed in both senses, that employment is identified and discussed. Finally, suggestions for future expansion of anti-terrorism and counterterrorism programs and policies are provided.

Counterterrorism also depends greatly on disciplines beyond those emphasized here, including engineering, finance, architecture, and transportation. This strategy is therefore intended as a flexible framework that can be expanded with additional expertise, tactics, and practices.

Al Qaida

Al Qaida (AQ) is a worldwide militant Islamist movement, "...the vanguard of a global fundamentalist insurgency seeking to unite the international Muslim community... (AQ) represents the internationalization of Islamic militancy..." (Spitaletta and Marshall in Thompkins, 2012, p.533). AQ was founded in 1988 at the home of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi construction magnate's son who became an Islamic *mujahideen* in Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan war. Bin Laden became AQ's first *emir* or leader (Klausen, 2021). Bin Laden and AQ co-founders established the organization along the lines of a business enterprise, with clear leadership and well-defined roles. Over time, AQ has grown to include various subsidiaries and affiliates, such as Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaida in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS), Al Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), Al-Shabaab's Islamic Emirate of Somalia (IES), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), among others.

AQ's organizational structure is that of a core, a periphery, and a movement (Helfstein and Wright, 2011). AQ's core, while "least likely to carry out a successful attack" (Helfstein and Wright, 2011, p.368), provides overall leadership and direction. Some AQ affiliates are more directly connected to AQ and share the AQ agenda and ideology, while other groups, such as homegrown terrorists in the global West are terrorists inspired by AQ, and yet other AQ affiliates are regional or local jihadist or insurgent networks that became affiliated with AQ (Celso, 2012). This collection of worldwide affiliates allows for a decentralized execution of attacks and operations.

AQ's strategy is both political and ideological (Sedgwick, 2004), with the ultimate aim of creating a worldwide caliphate, contingent on AQ's ability to carry out a multi-phase, multi-year plan (Musharbash, 2005). AQ uses meticulously planned attacks, some of them spectacular, as tactics in its global jihad. AQ attacks have included bombings of US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, bombing the USS Cole in 2000, the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an unsuccessful attempt to attack the White House. Since 2002, AQ has engaged in no fewer than 25 attacks on various targets around the world. Some of those attacks, such as the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the 2005 London bombings, were high-profile incidents that garnered worldwide attention. AQ affiliate attacks, such as the 2009 attempted attack on Northwest Flight 253 and the 2013 Al-Shabaab attack on Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Center, were also high-profile and caught the attention of the world.

Defending Against Al Qaida – Deter, Detect, Delay, Deny, Defeat

The overall architecture of the defense plan described in this paper is to *Deter, Detect, Delay, Deny,* and *Defeat* AQ. This frame allows for consideration of how to counter a terrorist attack at the various stages of that terrorist attack, from preplanning stages to operational stages. It is also applicable to the various battlefields and realms of modern terrorism, as today's terrorism landscape includes traditional types of attack (firearms, explosives) as well as unconventional attacks (such as biological, chemical, and radiological) and cyber-terrorism. The 5D frame also recognizes that some attacks can be compound; Al-Shabaab attackers in the 2013 siege of Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Center used grenades and firearms in their attack, while the 2008 Lashkar-e-Taiba Mumbai assault utilized firearms and explosives. To be most

effective, a defensive strategy should account for the various types of weapons and tactics that can be employed independently or in combination.

Deterrence

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides a particularly appropriate definition of *deterrence*, defining it, in part, as "the inhibition of criminal behavior by fear especially of punishment...the maintenance of military power for the purpose of discouraging attack" (Deterrence, 2025). The applicability of this definition should be apparent, as terrorism can be seen as a law enforcement issue, a military issue, or both. Though the definition is relevant, it is also noteworthy that many terrorists may not fear the sort of punishment that law can impose, and evidence that such punishment either acts as a deterrent or does not is still unclear (Wolfowicz and Salama, 2025). Viewed one way, the Islamist extremist who has psychologically elevated perceived obedience to Allah is not likely to fear earthly punishment as a deterrent to violent jihad. Even the fear of death cannot dissuade the Salafi fanatic, as suicide bombings demonstrate.

That does not render deterrence, as an overall factor, irrelevant. Deterrence can be viewed through the lens of target hardening, which intersects directly with delay and denial; the strategy, succinctly, is to introduce barriers and obstacles so significant that the terrorists, Al Qaeda in this case, are deterred from attacking before they even begin. If a target is hardened sufficiently, the anticipated difficulty in accomplishing a successful attack may deter terrorists from the attempt, achieving what can be termed *deterrence by denial* (Stein and Levi, 2015). This is akin to the type of focused deterrence that has been used successfully in law enforcement, where the deterrent measures are taken in relation to a specific demographic and a specific

geographic location (Moore and Pease, 2024). In the case of combatting terrorism, that location would be the target under consideration; the demographic under contemplation, here, would be Al Qaeda, although, as previously mentioned, there may be applicability to other terrorist organizations.

This speaks to "deterring terrorist attacks by either raising their cost or diminishing the likelihood of logistical success, with examples including airport metal detectors and intelligence gathering" (Guler and Demir, 2024, p.245); the mention, here of airport metal detectors is particularly relevant to Al Qaeda, given the events of September 11, 2001. Some authors have described how "... a combination of efforts economic, diplomatic, military, political, and psychological. . . could in fact establish a new strategy and create a new and effective posture of deterrence against terrorist groups" (Shanker in Kroenig and Pavel, 2012, p.21) and that "...deterrence should remain an important weapon in the counterterrorism arsenal" (Trager and Zagorcheva, 2005, p.88).

Deterrence might also be valuable in terms of the ability to thwart the goals of those who engage in terror (Trager and Zagorcheva, 2005). By making the achievement of terrorist aims less, rather than more likely to occur because of or subsequent to terrorism, counterterrorism can use deterrence. An ongoing policy of non-negotiation with terrorists is aimed at this sort of deterrence. It is meant to communicate to any and all terrorists that their commission of terrorist acts is not an avenue to achieve their overall organizational or ideological goals.

There are several specific means by which deterrence can have a preventive effect on terrorism. One area in which this could be possible involves deterring those who finance terrorism. Should we find that terrorism financiers are not as fanatical as their operational

counterparts, the financiers might be more susceptible to deterrence measures, such as the freezing of funds. Intelligence processes that would enable such freezing of funds can be its own source of deterrence, as well. Measures such as increased information sharing between private industry financial experts and government authorities, accessible terrorism financing-related information in a sort of central repository, and banking-related policies that allow for early sharing of suspicious information can all deter terrorism or the organized crime that often funds it (D'Souza et al., 2025). This relates to another financial method by which to deter Al Qaeda (and other terrorists), namely, the deterrence by inflicting increased costs to conduct terrorism (Lupovici, 2023). Between disrupting funding and increasing operational costs, financial measures may be among the most effective forms of deterrence available, and are accomplished pre-incident, which saves lives.

Detection

While deterrence may thwart some Al Qaeda activities even before they begin, detection plays a major role in counterterrorism and in combatting Al Qaeda. Dealing with financing of terrorism, as well as the deterrence that the prior section details, can also enable detection of terrorist activities. Forensic examination of financial support of past terrorism can help determine how terrorist financing occurs. For instance, financial investigators can look for the sort of finance paths that helped finance the September 11, 2001 attacks, such as financial proceeds from drug trafficking, donations, and organized crime (Berci, 2018).

Detection relates to the pre-operational as well as the operational phases of a terrorist occurrence. In the case of pre-operational detection, a major tool at hand is Social Network Analysis (SNA), "...the graphical and mathematical representation of dyadic interactions or

relations" (Moncrieff, 2024, p.167). SNA played a major role in locating Osama bin Laden, for example. Bin Laden's death was a significant blow to Al Qaeda. One study used SNA to demonstrate vulnerabilities in terrorist networks, such as Al Qaeda (among others), and indicated:

> "...dynamics of the terror hubs and the vulnerable motifs that we discover in the network backbone turn out to be very significant, and may provide deep insight on their formations and spreading, and thereby help in contending terrorism or framing public policies that can check their spread" (Husain et al., 2018, p. 1).

SNA should be considered an important part of the *detection* element of the 5D plan to combat Al Qaeda. With the increased implementation of tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, evaluation of large datasets that would help inform SNA can increasingly be accomplished more easily (Muramudalige, 2023).

Overlapping SNA is the use of social media analysis in detection of terrorism. The obvious application of this is to identify members of terrorist organizations, such as AQ, and monitor their activity for connection to other potential terrorists and for online indicators that a terrorist event is in the works. The prevalence of social media in a given nation has a predictive effect on the likelihood of terrorism being present in that nation. For example, Hunter et al. (2024) report that nations with higher levels of overall social media usage have higher rates of domestic terrorism, perhaps due to a facilitative effect on terrorist recruiting and higher levels of polarization. However, some data indicate that use of social media also dramatically increases the risk that a terrorist will be detected, thus decreasing the likelihood of that terrorist's success

(Byman and Mir, 2024). Inclusion of social media monitoring is therefore important to detection efforts.

Detection of terrorist activities via financial analysis is an important part of the *detection* aspect of the overall defense plan against Al Qaeda. A template of the type of financial analysis-based investigative system that can combat terrorism comes from Australia's Anti-Money Laundering/Counter-Terrorism Financing (AML/CTF) program. Analyzing reports from Australia's private sector financial community, the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC) evaluates entities and identifies transactions/actors who merit further scrutiny by means of this de facto public-private partnership (Scott and Webster, 2024). The United States can conduct comparable financial analyses and thereby detect potential terrorist activity and actors, and this can be used to combat Al Qaeda as well.

Detection is not the exclusive purview of intelligence agencies and AI tools. People play a key role. Successful programs such as the *iWatch*, whether organized by the civilian police or by the military, can be critical in gathering information on which to act (Vanderlinden, 2024). Despite the possibility of false positives, the *if you see something, say something* approach is still valid and has a place in a defense plan against terrorists, including Al Qaeda. This opens up the possibility that members of the public can help, especially when they are in positions to do so.

Private security personnel are especially important to the detection phase because they protect a substantial portion of U.S. critical infrastructure. Their regular presence at likely targets allows them to establish normal operating baselines and report suspicious activity that deviates from those baselines. The opportunity to use private security personnel to report suspicious activity and observations that deviate from established baselines can provide an important means

of early detection of terrorist activity. A possible prescription to implement this would be to ensure that trusted partners in the security industry receive training and certification in anti-terrorism and counterterrorism measures and that, to the highest degree possible, public-private partnerships that involve private security, law enforcement and intelligence are established and nurtured.

Delay

Delaying terrorist actions allows for additional countermeasures to be undertaken. This can be understood in at least two ways; delaying an attack before it occurs, and, delaying specific terrorist tactics once an attack has been initiated. As mentioned above, disrupting financing of Al Qaeda activities is one viable counterterrorism technique. Such a financial disruption could have the effect of delaying the terrorist activity. Delaying an attack by predictive deployment of counterterrorism assets is another example of using delay (Python, et al., 2016). Preemptive arrests or the neutralization of key personnel might also have the effect of delaying, at least temporarily, an Al Qaeda attack.

In terms of delaying terrorists once an attack has been initiated, this can refer to several different things. Access control methods, if they do not ultimately deny terrorist access to a target, may at least temporarily delay the terrorist from reaching the target. Essentially, any obstacle a terrorist must overcome can be an example of a delay during a terrorist attack. During an attack, delay can reduce harm by allowing potential victims to escape and by allowing time for first responders to arrive to intervene in the attack.

This sort of delay might have been helpful during, for example, the AQ attack on the Khobar oil industry complex in Saudi Arabia in 2004. In that instance, AQ operatives anticipated stronger resistance from security forces, but were able to move ever further into the compound, potentially increasing the lethality of the overall attack (Bakier, 2006). As the AQ terrorists continued the attack, they were able to take hostages, commit various murders, and turn the attack into a morale builder for AQ. At Khobar, there was a lack of any serious attempts at negotiating with terrorists; such negotiations, in addition to attempting to gain intelligence and convince terrorists to surrender, also allow for delays that enable the crafting of an appropriate response (Bakier, 2006). Therefore, when operationally appropriate and consistent with command policy, crisis negotiation can also create time to gather intelligence, communicate with perpetrators, and organize a tactical response.

The study of delaying terrorist attacks can also take on detailed mathematical dimensions. By evaluating previous terrorist events and analyzing certain factors, predictive models can be derived. Chuang et al. (2019), for instance, discuss how analysis of previous terrorist attacks using specific mathematical prediction formulas inform spatiotemporal correlation of attacks, which informs counter-terrorism resource allocation aimed at disrupting the near-repeat pattern, thereby potentially delaying subsequent attacks. The integration of such resource allocation intersects with the sort of target-hardening discussed above and illustrates how the various dimensions of this 5D protection plan are not linear or mutually exclusive but rather are overlapping and interactive.

Denial

Whereas deterrence seeks to discourage an attack and delay seeks to slow it, denial focuses on withholding the resources, access, information, or operating space necessary for terrorists to execute objectives. Just as with the *delay* aspect of combatting terrorism, *denial* also has at least a couple of different contexts in which it can be used. The first is pre-operational and relates to the denial of resources that would enable an AQ attack. For instance, it has long been suspected that groups such as AQ desire to obtain radioactive materials to perpetrate a radiological or nuclear terrorist attack (Albright, 2010; Mowatt-Larssen, 2010; Salama and Hansell, 2005; U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC), 2004). Allison (2010) speaks to the obvious need of denying access to radiological or nuclear materials to terrorists. Similarly, Dass (2024) discusses the need to deny terrorists access to radiological, chemical, and biological materials with which they might achieve the ability to conduct terrorism with such weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Both Allison and Dass are, in essence, presenting the same concept of *denial*, namely, the denial of resources. This concept is not exclusive to nuclear, biological, and chemical materials. The denial of any type of resource that could be used in furtherance of AQ aims will have a preventive effect. Resources that can be denied include conventional arms, training, funding, communications access, and specialized materials. That is not to say that those can be totally denied to AQ, but any instance of denying such resources sets AQ's attack timetable back, contributing to the *delay* aspect previously discussed.

Similarly, the same methods discussed above related to detection of terrorist funding might also be used to deny that funding to terrorists, including AQ. Scott and Weber (2024) report on the success of the Australian programs that address terrorist funding. The concept is

also being used in anti-money laundering (AML) and counter financing terrorism (CFT) efforts in Europe where, as in Australia, public-private partnerships are key in denying funds to terrorists (Attila, 2024).

The cyber realm plays heavily into *denial* of resources, as well. Cyber actions can have a huge effect on denying terrorists a means by which to promote their organization, distribute media related to successful terrorist operations, and secure online influence (Rassler, 2024). Because of the type of planning that AQ conducts in the cyber realm, denial of cyber resources to AQ can deprive AQ of means by which to communicate anonymously and to gather intelligence (Thomas, 2003). In an ever-increasingly cyber-connected world, the employment of cyber measures to combat groups like AQ, and specifically to deny those groups the types of cyber resources that would grow their organizations should not be overlooked.

Defeat

Defeat has at least two relevant meanings in this context. One meaning comes in the counterterrorism sense, where, to *defeat* AQ is to tactically and operationally overcome an AQ terrorist attack underway. This is simply not possible for every type of terrorist attack at every stage. For instance, to learn of a bomb that has been planted in a location and to deploy resources to that location and defuse the bomb is to defeat the attack. However, once a bomb detonates, that attack (or portion of that attack) has been completed, and it is no longer possible to defeat the attack; the attack is over as quickly as it has begun (presuming there are no secondary devices or follow-on elements to the overall terrorist attack).

Thus, some types of attack are more susceptible to defeat once they have begun than are other types of attack. The more prolonged an attack is, the more opportunities there are to defeat it at some point in the attack. An example of this is the July 13, 2008 Battle of Wanat, when AQ and Taliban forces attacked US and Afghan National Army forces at a base that was still under construction in the Nuristan province of Afghanistan's border region with Pakistan; AQ and Taliban forces were repelled after roughly four hours of intense combat and cost the US and Afghan forces a total of 9 killed and 31 wounded (Wanat; Combat action in Afghanistan, 2008).

Another example of defeating an AQ attack in progress is the passenger revolt on United Airlines flight 93 on the morning of September 11, 2001. Passengers voted to and then did revolt against AQ suicide attackers and ultimately caused the hijacked airliner to crash before it reaching its intended target, the White House. The crash took the lives of all 44 occupants of the airplane, including the four AQ hijackers (The 9/11 Commission report, 2004). The Battle of Wanat and Flight 93 demonstrate the high costs of relying upon *defeat* as a means to combat terrorist attacks once they are underway. The use of *deterrence, detection, delay,* and *denial* are clearly better options, when they are available and effective, to the extent that all of these options occur before, rather than after a terrorist attack is underway.

The second meaning of defeat is strategic rather than tactical. It concerns preventing AQ from sustaining its organization, recruiting adherents, financing operations, and advancing its ideology over time. Presuming that anti-terrorism efforts relate to measures taken before a terrorist incident is initiated, or measures that deal with non-operational aspects of terrorism, anti-terrorism can be seen as a preventive, rather than a reactive paradigm. To pre-emptively *defeat* AQ is much more difficult to accomplish outright, and there is no indication that it can be

accomplished at all in the near future. It could involve defeating the ideology and motivations that drive AQ as a motor for terrorism. However, there is some reason for hope, in that Jones and Libicki (2008) report that all terrorist groups ultimately end, either by integrating into the political process or because law enforcement and intelligence agencies (peculiarly, not military) arrest and/or kill a sufficient number of the terrorist groups' key members.

Conclusion

AQ remains a viable and serious threat to the United States because its ideology, affiliates, decentralized structure, and adaptable tactics allow it to operate across multiple regions and domains. A strategy organized around deterrence, detection, delay, denial, and defeat provides a practical way to integrate preventive, protective, investigative, and response capabilities. Although no single discipline or agency can eliminate the threat alone, coordinated work by intelligence services, law enforcement, military forces, emergency responders, private security, financial institutions, and community partners can reduce AQ's ability to plan, resource, execute, and recover from terrorist operations

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