



CENTER FOR TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS

Reviving Deterrence

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Compellence vs. Deterrence

In the 1960s, Thomas C. Schelling – who won the 2005 Nobel Prize in economics in part for his application of “the dismal science” to strategic problems – articulated the distinction between deterrence and what he called compellence. Deterrence fundamentally entails a state’s threatening to harm an adversary in order to persuade the adversary to forego some action inimical to the state’s interests. Compellence involves a state’s threatening to harm or actually harming an adversary in order to induce it to affirmatively take some action favorable to the state, even though it may disfavor the adversary. As Christopher Layne has recently pointed out, while the United States has been quite effective in deterring states from directly harming American interests and assets, it has had significantly less success in compelling adversaries – state and non-state – to act decisively against their perceived interests, whether through direct military threats or coercive diplomacy. Yet since 9/11, the United States’ approach to counter-terrorism has been predominantly compellent. That is, it has substantially involved direct action by U.S. military assets to kill or capture terrorists so as to compel their leadership to stand down.

The array of tasks for special-operations forces (SOF) contemplated by the Pentagon’s 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review – direct action, foreign internal defense, persistent surveillance, information operations, counter-proliferation – conjures visions of SOF darting willy-nilly across the globe, from one hotspot to another, smashing terrorist cells wherever they arise. These missions would be feasible, from both an operational and a political point of view, if most al-Qaeda affiliates were territorially-based groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), in the southern Philippines, which present readily identifiable legitimate military targets and have limited objectives that do not have a substantial strategic impact on American interests and are therefore susceptible to accommodation. Increasingly, however, al-Qaeda affiliates are more invisible, having infiltrated urban milieus. Leaving a dearth of effective targets, and given the inextricably piecemeal nature of law enforcement and the impossibility of airtight homeland security and passive defenses, this reality calls for an approach that leverages preventive or pre-emptive action that has a deterrent effect more than more ambitious measures aimed to modify behavior wholesale – that is, deterrence more than compellence.

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A Death Exaggerated

Deterrence, in its most basic form, embodies the power to keep an adversary from acting in a hostile way by threatening what that adversary values. A state values its population, its military-industrial base, its territory, and regime security. During the Cold War, these were easy to imperil with nuclear weapons and massive conventional militaries. An individual, however, has less to worry about – especially if he considers himself divinely guided and assured of a privileged afterlife – and is a much more difficult target for a conventional military to detect and threaten on an ongoing basis. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the new conventional wisdom was that deterrence was dead, or at least moribund. Terrorists who were willing to take their own lives and had religiously-driven apocalyptic designs, no state or infrastructure to protect, and no feasibly negotiable political agenda could not be expected to show restraint even when confronted by a credible threat of retaliatory punishment. Furthermore, rogue states like North Korea and Iran whose leaders had obscure and seemingly irrational mindsets could not be trusted to avoid suicidal behavior in the face of American nuclear superiority. The non-state threat produced an invigorated pre-emption doctrine, enunciated in the National Security Strategy released by the White House in September 2002. The rogue state threat galvanized the United States national and theater ballistic missile defense programs.

Gradually, however, analysts and officials have retrieved some faith in deterrence vis-à-vis states and, to a lesser degree, non-state actors. Time and again, Pyongyang has pushed the five powers engaged in curbing its nuclear ambitions near their diplomatic limits, then relented. Iran, unlike North Korea, does not yet have a nuclear weapon and Tehran's behavior is consequently more complicated. But its tactics – teasing engagement, diplomatic withdrawal, enrichment activities, missile tests, qualified hints of compromise – follow the same basic pattern as Pyongyang's, the most salient feature of which is preserving the possibility of a negotiated political settlement, a “grand bargain” that guarantees the existing regime. Overall, then, the recent conduct of these two troublesome states suggests that while they doggedly seek the political muscle that nuclear capability affords and are willing to endure political ostracism and visit serial crises of the rest of the world to get it, they are in fact deterrable under the traditional criteria.

Soon after 9/11, analysts at the RAND Corporation, where nuclear deterrence was nurtured and refined, began talking about the susceptibility of at least some of the new terrorists to political “influence” if not deterrence in the customary sense. Their basic idea, developed in a 2002 monograph by Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, was that since a diffuse movement like the transnational jihadist one enlists followers of myriad degrees of belief and commitment, many members will be amenable to co-optation or accommodation even if the core leadership remains maximalist and intractable. Leading academics like Mia Bloom, Farhad Khosrokhavar, and Robert Pape have also demonstrated that suicide attacks, though ostensibly senseless and desperate, are regarded by their perpetrators as the most efficacious option for the vastly weaker of two adversaries and have in fact proven to be strategically effective – particularly in the Palestinian territories and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, even those

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groups employing suicide attackers are subject to deterrence by punishment. Over the course of the second intifada that began in late 2000, Israel's "targeted killings" of top- and mid-level operators in Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups may correlate positively with a lower level of terrorist violence. While the suicide bombers themselves – the foot-soldiers of such groups – may be unconcerned about their physical well-being, their planners and supervisors apparently have less existential abandon and in any event remain operationally necessary for the groups to remain viable.

More broadly, in a penetrating 2005 book entitled "Deterrence," Lawrence Freedman noted that "deterrence is ubiquitous" – neither terrorists nor rogue states attack all the time – so there should still be a way to harness and stabilize deterrence with respect to non-state actors. He and others, while admonishing that there is no magic bullet, have suggested that deterrence by denial may be the most promising approach to the new terrorism. Subtler than deterrence by punishment, the denial version – which Glenn Snyder originally distinguished in 1959 – involves frustrating or obviating an adversary's political objectives such that hostile action in their pursuit will appear futile or unnecessary and be dismissed. To work against a networked and increasingly pervasive threat like that of transnational Islamist terrorism, establishing deterrence by denial is admittedly a stiff challenge: it requires the consolidation of a kind of new world order that generally does not tolerate terrorism and in which central terrorist grievances have been largely resolved. Deterrence by denial can also be achieved by frustrating terrorists' operational objectives, which calls for robust passive defenses, including border and port security, infrastructure protection, prophylaxis through vaccination and early detection, and first response.

The possibility has also been raised that even al-Qaeda's ostensibly intractable core leadership may be deterrable. Al-Qaeda's inner council, or *shura*, was divided as to whether the U.S. takedown of its Afghanistan base that would likely follow the 9/11 attacks was worth the prize. Indeed, the United States' failure to effectively retaliate for the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* – that is, to attempt to deter by punishment – seems to have been a key factor in the bin Laden's decision to go forward with the attacks. Whether recent trends reinforce or dilute the validity of that decision is unclear. On one hand, the post-Afghanistan dispersal and atomization of the global Islamist terrorist network has arguably given jihadists even less to treasure and consequently rendered them less deterrable. The spread of jihadist propaganda and urban warfare techniques via the internet has proven an effective, though perhaps not a perfect, substitute for radical madrassas and terrorist training camps.

On the other hand, operational authority and initiative have shifted to local or regional "start-up" groups like the Madrid and London culprits, and away from the core al-Qaeda leadership now besieged in the tribal areas around the Afghan-Pakistani border. As suggested by the RAND analysts, some local and regional groups have more parochial and geographically circumscribed basic grievances than does Osama bin Laden himself, however much they may sympathize with his grand vision. Thus, in *International Security*, Robert F. Trager and Dessislava P. Zagorcheva recently made a solid case that some combination of deterrence by punishment and qualified local political accommodation can translate into effective global deterrence with

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respect to some al-Qaeda affiliates – citing, in particular, the co-optation of the MILF in the Philippines. There is logic in this finding: while the frustration of political objectives at the regional and national level led bin Laden and second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri to globalize their fight, the partial fulfillment of comparable objectives may preclude their transnationalization.

There is, however, a rising recognition among radical Muslims of a pervasive if notional Islamic world community – the *umma*. In that light, the possibility remains that despite the flattening of the terrorist network, a sufficient number of operators of a maximalist bent – eschewing local agendas in favor of a global one – will arise to maintain the strategic threat to the United States and the West that 9/11 appeared to affirm. The received view remains that such highly-motivated terrorists cannot be permanently deterred because they value non-negotiable objectives more than their lives or other assets, but may be amenable to temporary deterrence for tactical reasons and to indirect influence. Several Western intelligence agencies do anticipate that transnational terrorists will seek a new territorial base – a chaotic Iraq would be a candidate, and Somalia remains a possible destination – and once again become susceptible to deterrence or, in any event, direct military strikes. But that vulnerability would presumably be transitory: any new sanctuary would, like the Taliban-run Afghanistan, provide the United States and its partners a *casus belli*, and once they destroyed it the terrorists would presumably regard dispersal and virtuality as all the more advantageous. Finding a solid basis for deterring a global network would again become a difficult challenge. Better to face that challenge now.

What Islamist Terrorists Value

If terrorists have a stake in a relatively non-violent status quo, deterring them is feasible. The stakes on which deterrence of a state would be based include the state's territorial and political integrity, the survival of a constituent population, regime security, and a supporting industrial and military infrastructure. Terrorists, though perhaps not as obviously, value analogous aspects of a world short of outright chaos. Whether deterrence can take hold depends on whether terrorists' adversaries – in particular, the United States and its allies and partners – can credibly imperil those things so as to ensure the terrorists' substantial forbearance.

Those who count themselves terrorists or terrorist supporters increasingly regard themselves as members of the *umma*, which has no corresponding politically integrated state and hence no matching territory. Superficially, this characteristic contra-indicates the effectiveness of deterrence: with no state to defend, transnational terrorists seem to present nothing for their adversaries to hold hostage through the threat of punishment. But in a deeper sense, somewhat as the Provisional Irish Republican Army considered the entire island of Eire their state-in-waiting, jihadists regard the entire Muslim world as their caliphate in the wings. Whether jihadist leaders actually consider their stated aim of a global caliphate that reprises Islam's eleventh-century hegemony – that is, an Islamic super-republic covering much of the world – a plausible objective is open to doubt. What matters more is that they do care about other Muslims – even those who do not directly support them.

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Still, turning jihadists' prudential solicitude for the welfare of their fellow Muslims into a credible tool of deterrence is problematic. Although rank-and-file Muslims do not take kindly to Muslims' killing Muslims, they are even less tolerant of Westerners' killing Muslims, so Western threats to target Muslims in general have an antagonistic rather than a deterrent effect. Iraq is a case in point. Although such threats would also be unacceptable under the laws of war – which bar the intentional military targeting of civilian non-combatants – this problem can be finessed if it is assumed, as it was during the Cold War nuclear standoff, that the deterring party does not intend to carry out the threat unless its enemy strikes (proportionately) first. But the difficulty remains that even making the threat offends Muslims and perforce risks the consequence of swelling the ranks of the jihadists. For substantially this reason, even terrorism employing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is considered difficult to deter: the only identifiable population for the would-be deterrer to threaten would be general, and therefore would not pass the proportionality test.

In any case, fellow Muslims are not all that Islamist terrorists hold dear. As Pape has shown in his book *Dying to Win*, many of them graft nationalist sentiments onto religious ones and vicariously value ostensibly Muslim territory – in particular, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine and Iraq, but also Jordan and the small Gulf Cooperation Council states – that they consider to be occupied or otherwise compromised by Western powers. Pape's argument is that substantial Western disengagement from such places, under a strategy of offshore balancing, would quell the jihad. This position critically downplays the purely religious and transnational dimensions of jihadism and the universalizing effect they have had on Muslims worldwide. Yet it's hard to deny that reducing U.S. primacy in the Persian Gulf would take steam out of the jihadist narrative. To most American officials and analysts, offshore balancing is a drastic and high-risk grand strategy. But primacy is also proving to pose prohibitive risks. A strategy of moderate accommodation – such as selective engagement – could have more efficacious deterrent-by-denial impacts.

Beyond Arab lands, other geographical areas appear to be of tactical interest to the al-Qaeda leadership. In April 2004, shortly after the Madrid bombing committed by a jihadist “self-starter” cell, bin Laden released an audiotaped message implicitly claiming complicity in the attack and offering to spare European states from terrorist attacks provided they withheld operational and political support for the United States' strategic agenda. Certainly bin Laden did not seriously expect anyone overtly to accept this “offer,” and it was disdainfully rejected by European capitals. Nevertheless, it made sense as part of a psychological operation designed to make them think twice about adopting a robust counter-terrorism enforcement strategy towards jihadists. Indeed, France had used a sanctuary approach against North African terrorists operating on French soil in the 1980s until its apparent ineffectiveness in discouraging terrorist operations caused them to reverse course.

Were al-Qaeda's gambit to work, Europe, or at least parts of it, could become an operational sanctuary for European jihadists – and, once again, a platform for launching attacks on the United States. Of course, this would not be a desirable result. But the larger point is that Islamist terrorists do have rational reasons to exempt

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certain areas from attack. Foreign policies well short of providing sanctuary that give the appearance of greater neutrality could deter attacks on national territories without compromising hard counter-terrorism capabilities. For example, U.S. partners might wish to publicly de-emphasize their strategic alignment with the U.S. while maintaining robust operational counter-terrorism links. In fact, that course of action describes the one France has actually taken. Unlike the UK and Spain, which have been more unabashed U.S. allies, France has not suffered a major terrorist attack since 9/11.

Jihadists are also keen to protect the integrity of their message, and to preserve the broader expectations of their supporters as well as their adversaries. Because the jihad is essentially a populist movement, the relevant audience in terms of losing or saving face consists not of states but rather of other Muslims – that is, the *umma*. Thus, in an intercepted July 2005 letter (generally considered genuine) Zawahiri, speaking for bin Laden as well as himself, importuned al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (who died in a U.S. air strike in June 2006) to stop killing Muslims – even Shi'ite Muslims – in Iraq and publicizing the mutilation of hostages. Zawahiri's fear was that Zarqawi would alienate Muslim “common folk.” He decried Zarqawi's practices not because they were morally objectionable, but because most Muslims failed to fully comprehend the bankruptcy that the leadership elite saw in Shi'ism and were repulsed by beheadings. The upshot is that al-Qaeda's leaders do rate popular acceptance on a par with religious objectives as a perpetuating element of the jihad. This reality cuts against the notion that even unwavering Islamist terrorists are fanatically implacable religious zealots.

Deterrence and Equilibrium

The central question as to deterring Islamist terrorists remains how to jeopardize their popular support. It is true that terrorists aim to revolt the general public enroute to instilling fear, so that up to a point public opprobrium only furthers their agenda. But when such condemnation is shared by the terrorists' notional constituency, they are vulnerable to deterrence. To deter them, their adversaries must win over their constituents in the *umma*. This conclusion, of course, is analytically just another way of saying that the United States and the West must win the battle for hearts and minds. But that campaign has generally been presented as an alternative to deterrence rather than an application of it. It is more useful to think of it as the latter.

Israeli military historian Martin Van Creveld has famously noted that when strong states confront terrorists with brute force, they are bound to lose in the long run. “He who fights the weak – and terrorists are weak by definition – and loses, loses. He who fights against the weak and wins also loses. To kill an opponent who is much weaker than yourself is unnecessary and therefore cruel; to let that opponent kill you is unnecessary and therefore stupid.” This formulation confirms that deterrence by threat of punishment vis-à-vis terrorists will be unavailing – not because of their recalcitrance, but because of political advantage that accrues to their weakness. For the same reason, it also indicates that military pre-emption may ultimately be futile. Deterrence by denial, very broadly construed, emerges as the best option.

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Following Van Creveld, its essential component would be the willingness of al-Qaeda's adversaries to accept a substantially greater number of casualties than it visited on al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Arguably, this worked for the British against the IRA. Enduring multiples more in casualties – military and civilian – than did the IRA and its putative constituency, the United Kingdom was eventually able to reach a modus vivendi with the IRA with its honor and status as a great power more or less intact. It accomplished this by approaching counter-terrorism as a function mainly of law enforcement and political engagement rather than military coercion. Although the UK deployed up to 30,000 soldiers in Northern Ireland, their function was primarily to deter civil war rather than terrorism per se. About five years into the 25-year conflict, in 1976, the Northern Irish police were given primary counter-terrorism authority, and terrorist offenses were statutorily accorded criminal as opposed to political status and terrorist prisoners officially treated as ordinary inmates.

It is true that the IRA resisted criminalization, and won a degree of credibility by way of the prison blanket protest and the 1981 hunger strikes, which also increased popular backing for Sinn Fein, the IRA's legal political wing. Nevertheless, in the long term the British approach effectively denied the IRA the ability to indoctrinate a sufficient number of its supporters, both within and outside of Northern Ireland, to prevail in its "armed struggle." Throughout "the troubles," the Social Democratic and Labour Party – "constitutional" nationalists who believed that Ireland should be united only through non-violent political means – enjoyed more than double Sinn Fein's popular support in Northern Ireland. Only after the IRA declared a cease-fire in 1994 and chose a largely non-violent political path was Sinn Fein able to build the electoral base to become the strongest Irish nationalist party and draw determinative political support from major outside players such as the United States.

For the current global campaign against Islamist terrorism, the lesson is that military action designed to defeat al-Qaeda and its followers, even if tactically successful, is likely to be strategically disappointing. No matter how many jihadists are killed on the battlefield, at least as many will be sufficiently inspired by the aggression of the infidel (or its apostate Muslim proxy) to take up the struggle. Just such a vicious cycle appears to have been triggered by U.S. intervention in Iraq, and might be replicated in miniature by Ethiopia's American-backed intervention against Islamists in Somalia. The antidote, to be sure, is not for the United States and its partners to be passive in war and take casualties profligately – that too would fuel recruitment – but rather to avoid war against Islamists when possible.

As to how to deter terrorists, then, the central analytic quandary becomes whether what they value can be politically threatened more by physically endangering it less. The fact that they feed on the perceived oppression of strong states suggests that the answer is yes: if, conversely, they are denied that oppression, they may become politically starved. Like bin Laden before him, Zarqawi became the jihad's most charismatic player by surviving the American military onslaught in Iraq and adding to that insult by killing Americans. He personified the manner in which the United States perversely handed al-Qaeda a new and potent grievance and made it less rather than more deterrable. As Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter suggest in *The Four*

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Faces of Nuclear Terrorism, the Madrid bombers might not be as willing as core al-Qaeda leaders to kill 200,000 rather than 200, and “old” style ethno-nationalist terrorists or single-issue groups certainly would not be given their desire, respectively, to preserve political options or focus public attention on a finite set of perceived culprits. Both political liabilities and anticipated retaliation appeared to play a part in the Chechen rebels’ decision not to detonate a dirty bomb in 1995. More generally, extreme operational objectives – insofar as they would inspire extreme response – may discourage recruitment.

As the global jihad disperses, it logically has to rely more on numbers and pervasiveness and less on command and control. While Ferguson and Potter make the point that nuclear capability would bring a terrorist organization closer to statehood, the post-Afghanistan trend appears to be for jihadist organizations to regard territorial cohesion as a defensive liability. This disposition, however, could change not only if jihadists come to possess WMD but also, more benignly, if they encounter greater political success within Islam. Greater political legitimacy would render the physical reconstitution of radical Islamism more justifiable, and any coercive attempt to dislodge it proportionately less justifiable. This incentive would probably, on balance, make Islamist leaders favor the establishment of some form of state. By the same token, to retain a sufficient degree of legitimacy to protect that state from attack by a threatened government, any Islamist leadership would have to exercise considerable military restraint. Operations like 9/11 obviously would still constitute grounds for war, and demonstrable operational (as opposed, say, to merely financial) sponsorship of insurgencies or start-up terrorist groups would at least provide adversaries with a prima facie case for the responsive use of force.

Having both experienced the United States’ willingness to destroy the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and registered the political cost of the United States’ excess in Iraq, the Islamist leadership might be deterred from launching mass-casualty attacks against Western targets and inclined to relinquish the initiative to use large-scale force to its putative adversaries. The result would be, in brief, a new equilibrium in which each side sought to sustain its political legitimacy by advancing its ideology with a minimum of force. In this new cold war, radical Islamists would behave more like the African-American civil rights leaders of the 1960s than the al-Qaeda of the past decade. Though doubtless a few analogs to the Black Panthers would emerge, concern for legitimacy would make the new incarnation of Islamism disinclined to put its reputation for action in defense of interests and constituents at undue risk. That would mean avoiding over-commitment – that is, resisting anything resembling a public vow that it is not likely to be capable of fulfilling. Whereas a big part of the old al-Qaeda’s political arsenal was lurid and sensationalistic rhetoric – for example, spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith’s oft-quoted proclamation that four million Americans would have to die before the United States were ripe for mass conversion to Islam – the fanciful grandiosity of such statements would disfavor them in the new situation. Their suppression, in turn, would tend to diminish recruitment and stabilize the confrontation between Islamism and secularism.

Appreciating Hezbollah

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Under this scenario, deterrence would obtain not in any pure univalent form, but as an indeterminate and shifting combination of deterrence by punishment, deterrence by denial, and self-deterrence – as it did during the first cold war. The implicit strategy of encouraging the political legitimacy of Islamism and its constitution in state-like forms seems, at first blush, counter-intuitive to say the least. Why would we want to promote a religious ideology that has heretofore counseled the destruction of our own state structures, political systems, and cultures? The answer is to furnish its leaders with something tangible to value – and, therefore, to threaten. Paradoxical as this formulation may sound, it is no more so than deterrence itself, which aims to maintain peace by promising destruction.

The slow – and as yet incomplete – evolution of the militant Shi'ite group Hezbollah from an unregenerate anti-Israeli terrorist group into a powerful and substantially legitimate political player in Lebanon is a case in point. Having enjoyed electoral success for several years, Hezbollah in 2006 entered into a political alliance with more mainstream Druze and Christian parties because, with Syria ousted from Lebanon, Hezbollah needed new political cover for its stance of resistance to Israel. Although Hezbollah still sporadically harasses Israel with small-scale attacks, a kind of equilibrium has been reached. Absent provocation – which of course Israel did provide last summer – Hezbollah's wholesale return to violence would give rise to substantial opposition among its coalition partners, such that its political viability in the new Lebanon would be in jeopardy. Hezbollah admittedly does not have strong incentives for disarming, and may be content with accepting the patronage of its partners in exchange for their endorsement of its armed status. At the same time, its freedom to return to large-scale violence is limited because doing so would mean forsaking a large measure of its hard-won political clout.

The general formula for establishing similar foundations for deterrence elsewhere is the United States' exercise of political tolerance on a global scale to an extent that has been unthinkable since 9/11. Granted, the programmatic solution to the problem of extirpating terrorism's root causes has been to institutionalize tolerance writ large by establishing or enhancing democracy and individual liberties in the Greater Middle East. But the accompanying factual assumption has been that liberal democracies discourage radicalism and political violence, and that their creation would simply diminish the threat of terrorism rather than make it more deterrable. This view almost certainly would not be borne out in a number of key countries. The belated recognition of this reality – spurred by frustrated efforts of the United States to build a liberal pluralistic state in Iraq – has prompted the U.S. government to acknowledge that the exportation of democracy under the Bush doctrine must proceed more slowly, gently and selectively than originally hoped in 2003. But illiberal regimes, the thinking runs, must remain secure in places like Egypt lest Islamists gain decisive political power and reject U.S. and broader Western influence.

Proactively organizing the dismantling of such governments would indeed be imprudent, in that it could undermine crucial bilateral American relationships or produce traumatic shocks that might touch off wider violence and instability. Passively allowing Islamists to non-violently gain political legitimacy at the national

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level, however, might yield them a concrete position in an existing polity that they would be loath to jeopardize through transnational jihadist violence. The political success of Hezbollah within Lebanon has quite clearly dimmed any out-of-area ambitions it may have had and tamped down extra-territorial terrorist operations, and Hamas's victory in the Palestinian Authority elections has rendered it less rather than more likely to make tactical alliances with al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Partially fulfilled Islamists like Hezbollah and Hamas would be easier to manage – and perhaps eventually to influence and co-opt. More immediately, they would be deterred from transnationalizing political violence and striking American territory.

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