



The War On Terror is Back

March 15, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman** *The National Interest*

Related Categories: Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Warfare; Africa; Gaza; Iran; Israel; Middle East; United States

Within the Beltway, February and March tend to be busy months, when high-ranking military commanders and senior intelligence officials descend on Capitol Hill to update lawmakers on the assorted threats facing the United States. This year, however, interspersed with the usual briefings about Russia (reenergized by what it sees as flagging Western support for Ukraine) and China—with its persistent desire to dominate Taiwan—Members of Congress also heard a different and deeply unwelcome message. The conflict once called the "War on Terror" has well and truly returned.

Most immediately, the cause is the savage campaign of terror carried out by the Palestinian terror group Hamas on October 7, 2023. Much like the Biden administration's hasty retreat from Afghanistan three years ago inspired a fresh generation of jihadists, the grisly success of Hamas' offensive against Israel (which resulted in the largest slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust) has breathed new life and vitality into an array of extremist Islamic factions.

"Both al-Qa'ida and ISIS, inspired by the HAMAS attack against Israel, have directed their supporters to conduct attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests," Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines informed the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Furthermore, Hamas' actions are now "galvanizing individuals to leverage the Palestinian plight for recruitment and inspiration to conduct attacks."

But other factors are also at play. In Africa, for instance, massive disparities in resources, widespread economic privation, and chronically weak regimes have generated enormous volatility and given Islamists a much-needed foothold. "In East Africa, al-Shabaab and ISIS bring violence to peoples already struggling with inter-ethnic clashes and climate-related food and water shortages," Gen. Michael Langley, who leads the United States Africa Command, told the Senate on March 7. "Conflict and climate challenges also loom over the vast populations and natural resources of Central Africa, while Southern Africa faces economic and energy shortfalls, combined with an ISIS insurgency in Mozambique."

Simultaneously, massive strategic gains are being made by another actor, Iran, which is fast emerging as the principal beneficiary of the spreading regional disorder in the Middle East. In recent testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee, Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, the head of U.S. Central Command, illustrated that regional threats like attacks on maritime commerce by Yemen's Houthi rebels and the targeting of U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria by Shia militias are part of a larger pattern, with the Islamic Republic at its center. The events of October 7 "created the conditions for malign actors to sow instability throughout the region and beyond," Kurilla said, and Iran leaders have "exploited what they saw as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the Middle East to their advantage."

At the moment, America is woefully unprepared for such a resurgence. In recent years, countering Islamic extremism has taken a back seat to "great power competition" with a rising and increasingly belligerent China (as well as an aggressive, militaristic Russia), with profound effects. Relevant defense budgets have dwindled as policymakers in Washington have increasingly prioritized conventional warfighting over special operations and low-intensity conflict. Just as profoundly, counterterrorism has ceased to be a significant organizing principle in U.S. policy planning. Indeed, the Biden administration's October 2022 National Security Strategy barely makes any mention of the urgency of fighting against militant Islam and contesting extremist actors.

Yet, as strategic planners know all too well regarding the battlefield, the adversary also gets a vote. So, it is with the threat posed by radical Islam. As America increasingly focuses on the dangers of Russian imperialism and Chinese expansionism, extremist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, as well as malign actors such as Iran, are exploiting the consequent opening. The result is a spreading global disorder that threatens both American interests and U.S. allies.

All of this demands that Washington refocus in earnest on the counterterrorism fight and do so without delay.