

LEVERAGE POINTS FOR THE WAR ON TERROR

The Iraq Experience and Domino Theory Revisited

By MARVIN BAKER SCHAFFER

Sculptures of Saddam were removed from Republican Palace towers after overthrow of regime

With the passage of time and the contentiousness of the Iraq conflict fading, it should be possible to make a more objective assessment of the rationale leading to that war. The overwhelming public perception is that the Iraq War was a misguided attempt to track down and stop Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program. However, while the WMD rationale was raised by the Bush administration itself and certainly influenced the decision to engage in hostilities, it was not the tipping point.



DOD (Jim Gordon)

The principal objective of the Iraq conflict was to decrease the likelihood of additional attacks on the American homeland by striking a decisive blow against the global terrorist threat. The hoped-for sequence of events was regime change in Iraq followed by destabilization of Iran and subsequent collapse of several significant components of the global terror network. That collapse, of course, did not occur. Iran, instead of being destabilized, was energized to exploit the chaos in Iraq and to increase its support of Hizballah and Hamas, both terrorist organizations as defined by the State Department. Attacking Iraq was a rational strategy but insufficient in and of itself.

Flash back to an early (hypothetical) 2003 crisis meeting of the National Security Council. The subject of discussion was the threat of global terrorism. What were the elements of the threat, should these be attacked, and which subset would give the greatest leverage for protecting American interests at home and abroad? It quickly became apparent that there were a half-dozen major attack points and about 20 smaller ones. They could not all be addressed simultaneously, and a sequential attack could take a decade. Prudence dictated that, if warranted at all, a small number should be attacked in the hope of undermining and bringing down the rest with minimum loss of American life. The choice made in 2003 was to attack Iraq, with continuing but decreased attention to Afghanistan.¹

Critics of the March 2003 Iraq invasion maintain that it was the wrong war to defeat global terrorism. They assert that the exclusive focus should have been on Afghanistan and that the Iraq incursion diluted that effort. Are the critics right or misguided? Would an intensified attempt to capture or eliminate Osama bin Laden have been more productive than the protracted but arguably successful conflict in Iraq? To reiterate, this analysis concludes that the twin focus on Iraq and Afghanistan was correct and indeed *necessary*, but not *sufficient*. A third attack should have been on Iranian WMD facilities with the collateral hope of achieving regime change.

More generally, the 2003 objective should have been decisive engagement of linchpin rogue dominos,² the ones most likely to cause collapse of the myriad of terrorist entities on

the world scene. An example of the domino process was the response of Libya, which came to terms with the West by renouncing its WMD program in 2003, arguably because of Iraq. We are left with Iran, Syria, Hizballah, Hamas, and al Qaeda (among others), still viable and all still advocating terrorist-type destruction of American interests.

Those issues are treated next, starting with an analysis of the global terrorist threat as seen through the eyes of the National Security Council in early 2003. We then proceed to identify the most lucrative dominos.

About half of the 42 groups, through their direct actions or by association with al Qaeda, could be characterized as threatening to American interests. Figure 2 summarizes major linkages and state sponsorships of the most threatening entities.

The interrelationships were pervasive. Eight of the threats to the United States were linked to al Qaeda through either funding or training programs. Seven had sponsorship through funding, equipment, or training from Iran, four had some form of state support from Syria, and two had links to Saddam. It

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The 2003 Global Terrorist Threat

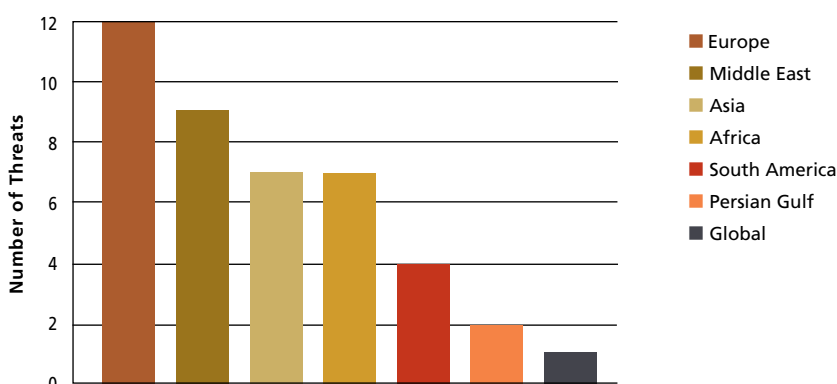
In October 2002, the Department of State had a list of more than 200 entities linked to terrorism.³ After eliminating individual terrorists and commercial organizations, that list can be narrowed to 42 groups based in 23 countries,⁴ the regional distribution of which is displayed in figure 1.

It is clear that terrorism has been a global phenomenon. The largest concentration of threats was in Europe, half in Northern Ireland, but the rest of the European Union was also infested. The Middle East with a focus on Israel and Palestine followed next. Significant threats existed in central and far eastern Asia, Africa, South America, and the Persian Gulf. Only one “global threat” had been identified, al Qaeda, responsible for attacking the World Trade Center in 1993 and for devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001.

is evident that focus on a single entity would probably have been inadequate. It also suggests that attack of a strategically selected subset would have been more efficient than attacking all.

Al Qaeda, with the most extensive terrorist network, deserved high priority, and indeed was addressed on multiple fronts.⁵ Diplomatic efforts had established a broad coalition to oppose it and included the United States, European Union, Canada, Australia, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan. Activities to constrain al Qaeda included intelligence collection, law enforcement, financial restrictions, and military operations. Operation *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan directed at both the Taliban and al Qaeda comprised 90 nations, the largest military coalition ever assembled. By early 2003, the bulk of Afghan territory had been liberated from Taliban control, and al Qaeda in Afghanistan had been substantially weakened.

Figure 1. 2003 Threat Levels



Marvin Baker Schaffer is an Adjunct Staff Member at the RAND Corporation.

However, al Qaeda has been a highly decentralized organization. Focus on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, or Iraq, or on specific cells elsewhere may alleviate the immediate threat in that local area but does not extinguish the global fire. Similarly, the focus on worldwide financial constraints had been extensive but apparently insufficient to dry up monies from obscure private sources in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria.⁶ Furthermore, killing or capturing al Qaeda leaders had not accomplished the global task of destroying the network. Al Qaeda apparently does not qualify as a linchpin domino since there is no single point or small group of points on which to exert military leverage.

had been terminated, accompanied by heavy counterterrorist and nationbuilding efforts at the grass roots level, it would have been difficult and perhaps impossible for al Qaeda to sustain itself.

WMD were another important component of the global threat. From the National Security Council perspective, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Libya all had potential for acquiring or developing nuclear and biological weaponry or had already deployed chemical weapons. Iran's nuclear program had previously been extensively exposed to the global media. Syria and Libya had attracted less attention in the WMD context but their terrorist activities were known, and as subsequent events have

linchpin domino, but it is now clear that the global deterrence impact of that war was limited. Was Iraq a correct target in March 2003? The alternatives are summarized in figure 3.

The methodology focuses on which terrorist entities, if any, were appropriate targets. For the United States, doing nothing would essentially constitute surrender or, at the least, demonstrate extreme weakness. Alternatively, if the focus was exclusively on Afghanistan, bin Laden might conceivably have been brought to justice but only by also invading border areas of a U.S. ally, Pakistan, where safe haven status had been extended to both the Taliban and al Qaeda. Additional possibilities were to strike Iraq or Iran, separately or collectively. It is observed that Iran was a decidedly more difficult opponent than Iraq militarily. However, regime change was not the only option. A more limited action against Iran combined with the Iraq attack might have been sufficient. Note also that if actions were confined strictly to Iran or Afghanistan, Iraq would remain on the scene, and the world might still believe Saddam possessed a WMD program. Despite the fact that destabilization of the Iranian regime was unfulfilled, it is reasonable to believe that Iraq was a legitimate target in 2003.

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Analysis suggests that al Qaeda might have been more readily defeated by expanded security support to those countries at risk, intensive cultural and moral arguments, more localized social and financial support, and elimination of state sponsorships including safe havens. Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and others fell into the state sponsorship category in 2003. If those sources of support

shown, they proved significant. We distill this information below to define a more efficient plan for combating the 2003 global threat.

Choices for Domino Leverage

It is plausible to postulate a domino effect in the international fight against state and insurgent terrorism. It was judged going into the invasion that Iraq would prove the

Figure 2. Sponsorships and Terrorist Linkages (2003)

Al Qaeda

Al Gama ut al-Islamiyya > Egypt
Al Jihad > Egypt
Al Ittihad > Somalia
Asbat al Ansar > Lebanon
E Turkistan Islamic Movement > China
Harakat ut-Mujahidin > Pakistan
Islamic Army > Yemen
Islamic Movement > Uzbekistan
Libyan Islamic Fighting Group > Libya
Tunisian Combat Group > Tunisia

Syria

Palestine Islamic Jihad > Israel, West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Lebanon
Abu Nidal Organization > Israel, Lebanon, Sudan
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine > Israel, Lebanon
Hizballah > Lebanon

Iraq

Abu Nidal Organization > Israel, Lebanon, Sudan
Mujahedeen-e Khalq > Iran
Palestine Liberation Front > Israel

Iran

Al Gama ut al Islamiyya > Egypt
 Hamas > Gaza Strip, West Bank
 Hizballah > Lebanon
 Palestine Islamic Jihad > Israel, Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria
 Salafist Group for Call and Combat > Algeria

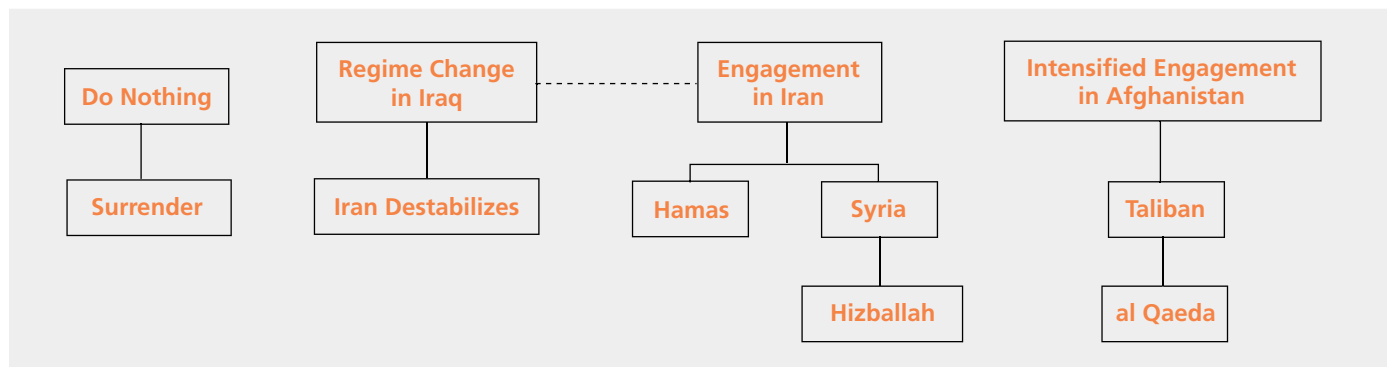
Libya

Abu Nidal Organization > Israel, Lebanon, Sudan
Palestine Liberation Front > Israel

Afghanistan

Taliban > Afghanistan, Pakistan

Figure 3. Bush Administration Choices in March 2003



Regime change in Iran was complex and chancy. The Ayatollah Khamenei was solidly entrenched in power with political opposition having been eliminated. Compounding the difficulties, Iran also had strength diplomatically since it exported oil and gas to China and imported advanced weapons and nuclear technology from Russia; both supported Iran in the Security Council of the United Nations. With those factors in mind, the decision to attack Iraq instead was made with the hope that Iran might then come to terms. That might have been more realistic if regime change in Iraq had been combined with a severe blow against Iran—say, by attack of its WMD capability. Even if the regime was not destabilized, it would have weakened and delayed that program.

It is observed that attack of Iran's WMD capability could have been accomplished with airpower alone, with no need for ground troops. The main elements of Iran's nuclear weapons program known to exist in 2003 are identified in figure 4.⁷ Those with the most significance for global terrorism were the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and the heavy water/breeder reactor facilities at Arak. An estimated 300,000- to 5,000-pound precision-guided bombs would have been required to destroy Iran's principal WMD assets.

The broad linkages between Iran and world terrorism are displayed in figure 5. The implication is that Iran was a nucleus of terror in the Middle East. A major blow against Iran could have undermined Syria, Hamas, Hizballah, and possibly the Taliban and al Qaeda as well. It is believed Syria (in the spirit of Libya) would have caved in because it was weak and would not want to suffer the same fate as Iran. Hamas and Hizballah were direct recipients of financial assistance, training, and doctrinal support from Iran and Syria, the interruption of which would severely weaken

Figure 4. Iranian Nuclear Facilities



- Arak (Khondab)** heavy water plant and 25-megawatt uranium breeder reactor
- Ardakan** nuclear fuel site
- Bushehr** pressurized water reactor
- Gachin and Saghand** uranium mines and processing facilities
- Isfahan (Esfahan)** uranium conversion facility
- Lashgarak** unverified uranium enrichment plant in tunnels under lake
- Natanz** underground uranium enrichment facility; ~5,000 centrifuges
- Qom** recently disclosed uranium enrichment plant
- Tehran** 5-megawatt research breeder reactor

them. The links to the Taliban and al Qaeda, although more speculative, are not beyond reasonable belief.

Iran was the remaining critical domino element. Iran had a nuclear weapons program, it overtly supported terrorist organizations such as Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in

the Gaza Strip, it was a supplier of weaponry to global insurgents and the Afghan Taliban, it collaborated with another terrorist state, Syria, and it openly threatened the physical existence of Israel.

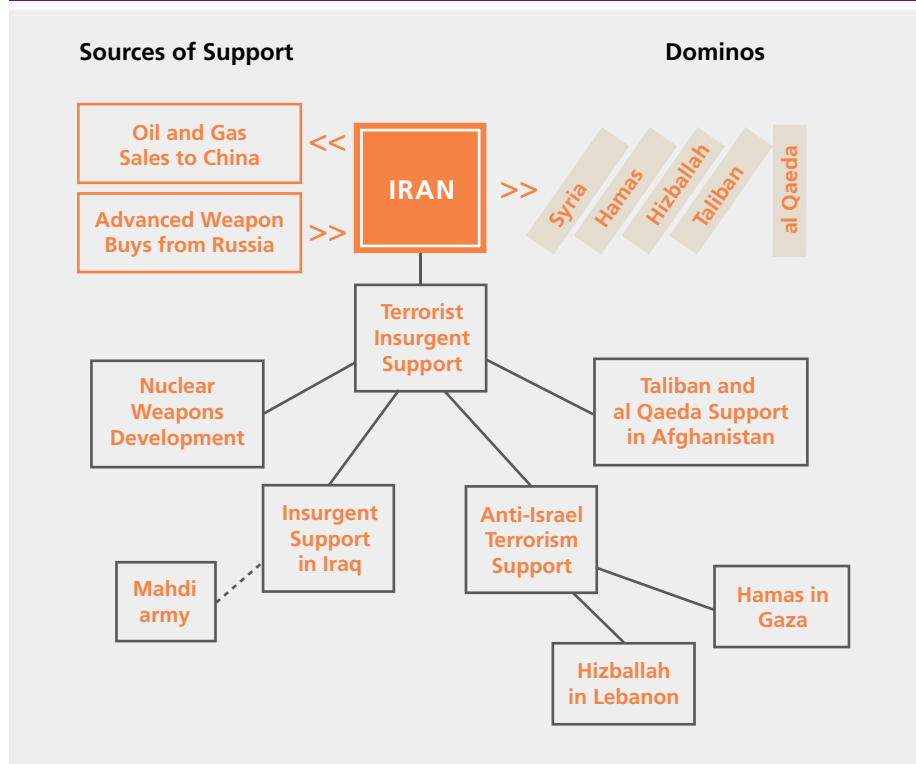
It was of course preferable that diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran be

strengthened as the principal lever for compliance as opposed to war. Nevertheless, if severe blows had been imposed on Iran militarily, it is conjectured that dominos would have fallen, just as Libya retreated when the United States invaded Iraq.⁸

Of course, 2010 is not 2003. Even though Iran is now more of a nuclear threat than before, attack of Iranian WMD facilities by the United States under the Obama administration seems highly unlikely. For better or worse, this puts any current action in the

hands of Israel. Many analysts believe that an attack by Israel on Iran's WMD facilities would have negative consequences for world peace. Additionally, in 2010, the Iranian people would probably rally to support their regime, whereas in 2003 the opposite might have occurred. The failure of the United States to act in 2003 when the political climate was permissive constitutes a substantial "opportunity cost" for the global community.

Figure 5. Iran as the Linchpin Rogue State



Strategic Consequences

The objectives of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were to strike a significant blow against global terrorism; to end Saddam's brutal regime and bring him to justice; to find and eliminate suspected weapons of mass destruction; and to assist the Iraqi people in forming a representative government that might be a model for other nations in the Middle East. An unarticulated additional objective (but considered of high importance) was to influence other rogue regimes to mend their policies or risk suffering the same fate as Iraq.

Some of the objectives were achieved at least in part, but one was a complete failure and others were only partially successful. A scorecard is provided in figure 6, the focus being on the underlying strategic implications.

What has been achieved strategically of lasting significance? The United States came to understand that success in Iraq did not guarantee victory in the global war on terror. The best that could be hoped for was a domino effect whereby other rogue states seek accommodation rather than suffer eventual

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defeat. America learned how to fight 21st-century guerrilla insurgents, or more precisely, how *not* to fight them. It slowly ascertained that American-style democracy is not easily transferred elsewhere and that trying to create it in an engrained fundamentalist society has severe limitations. Nevertheless, significant strategic gains were achieved in Iraq, which now has a viable constitution that enables equitable power-sharing between Shiites,



U.S. Army (Sean A. Terry)

Soldiers offload from CH-47 in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom

Sunni, and Kurds. The status of women in Iraq has improved. However, Iraq is a questionable model for democratic institutions in the Middle East or elsewhere.

The United States eventually learned the secret of defeating terrorist insurgents in Iraq but only after 4 years of inconclusive fighting that resulted in more than 4,200 American casualties (not to mention the larger Iraqi loss of life and destruction of infrastructure). That period of floundering almost lost the war. It now is increasingly clear that the key to 21st-century success

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against terrorist insurgents is empowering and motivating indigenous military and police forces to perform effectively. Enlisting the cooperation of nonextremist tribal leaders through subsidies, infrastructure improvements, and personal security appears a necessary precursor. Tribal cooperation with moderate elements was indeed a key ingredient in Iraq, even though it involved dealing with former terrorists.

As demonstrated by the 2007–2008 “surge,” the local empowerment strategy worked. Both military and civilian casualties in Iraq have decreased significantly, government services have improved, important areas have been handed over to the Iraqi army for insurgency control, and some American surge troops are being withdrawn as excess. Unlike attrition-based criteria

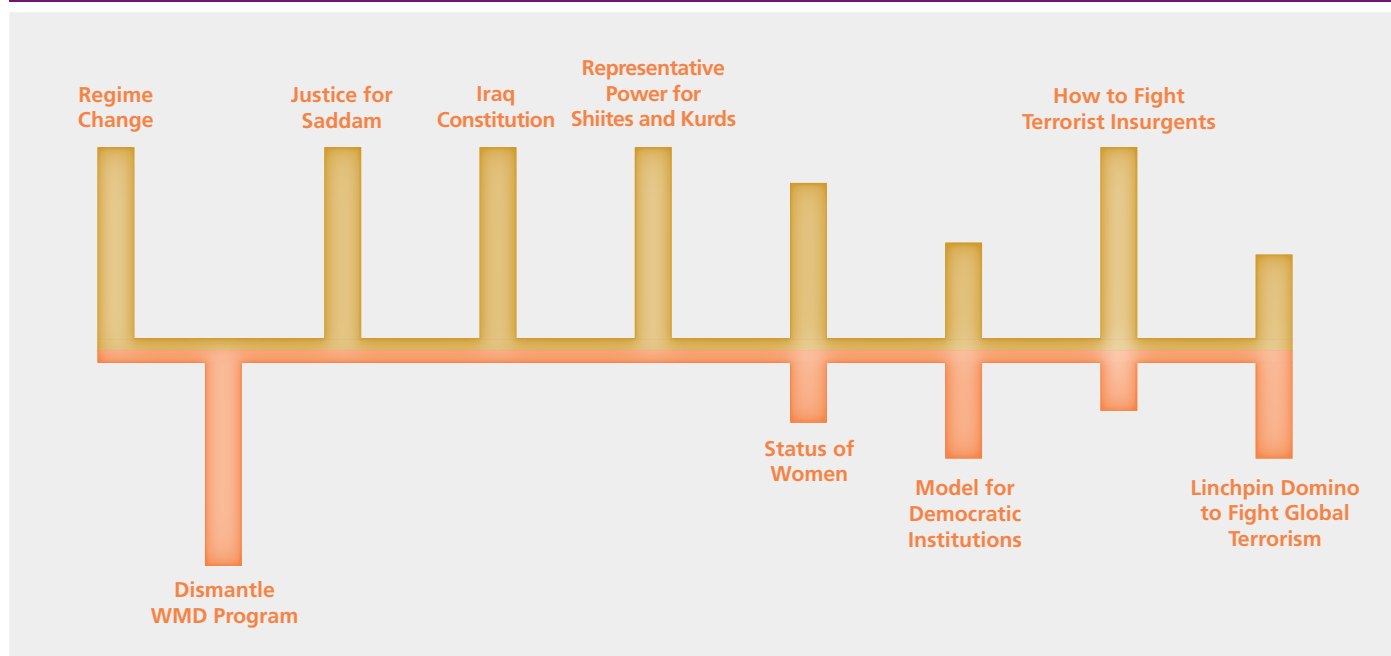
used unsuccessfully in Vietnam and initially in Iraq, the correct measures of excellence are reductions in violence, infrastructure improvements, and services delivered. This new paradigm for defeating guerrilla insurgents can be applied to other ongoing conflicts such as in Afghanistan. Hopefully, outreach to less extreme elements of the Taliban accompanied by a relatively small

U.S. Marine Corps (Brian L. Wickliffe)



Marines advance on Az Zubayr, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom

Figure 6. Strategic Scorecard for Iraq War



increase in troop levels can achieve the same success attained in Iraq.

In general, the strategic scoreboard for Iraq shows mixed results. Among the more important findings are insights about Iran, the linchpin rogue, and why and how it should have been engaged. The order of priority for engaging Iran should have been (1) diplomacy, (2) disruption of its WMD program, and (3) destabilization of the government.

As a consequence of drawn-out and inconclusive fighting, the United States eventually learned that empowerment of the Iraqi army and police, along with coopting tribal elements for support, was the winning strategy for success in that war. That was a reversal of the initial attrition-based strategy that ultimately proved unsuccessful. The new paradigm is establishing a secure environment followed by training, equipping, reinforcing, and financing the Iraqis to conduct their own counterinsurgency with support from moderate tribal elements. Afghanistan is a candidate for the same strategy.

Insights have also been gained regarding the culpability of Iran in promoting Middle Eastern terrorism. It had been hoped that the invasion of Iraq would produce a domino

effect inducing rogue organizations and states such as Iran to accommodate to acceptable world standards. That happened with Libya, but unfortunately has not occurred elsewhere. It is increasingly apparent that Iran was a linchpin for bringing Syria, Hizballah, Hamas, and possibly al Qaeda to a level of better international behavior. Constrained military actions against Iran were appropriate in 2003 to cause terror dominos to fall. In the 2010 environment, for better or worse, that military option appears increasingly unlikely.

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NOTES

¹ At that point in time, the Taliban in Afghanistan had been routed and although Osama bin Laden had not been apprehended, al Qaeda had been seriously weakened.

² Domino theory is most often associated with the Eisenhower administration's justification for American intervention in Indochina in 1954.

³ U.S. Department of State Publication Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*, April 2005; *Fact Sheet*, October 11, 2002.

⁴ The list is not exhaustive. It does not include state sponsors such as Cuba, North Korea, Sudan, and Venezuela. Cuba and Venezuela have actively

supported violent antigovernment terrorists in Colombia and elsewhere. North Korea has exported long-range missile hardware and nuclear weapons technology for more than a decade. Sudan was first labeled as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993, but even though it continued to support Hamas, it was dropped from the United Nations terrorist list in 2001.

⁵ Office of the Secretary of State Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002*, April 2003; Victor Comras, "Al Qaeda Finances and Funding to Affiliated Groups," *Strategic Insights* 4, no. 1 (January 2005).

⁶ In early 2003, 166 countries had issued orders freezing more than \$120 million in terrorist-related financial assets. The United Nations had established a comprehensive group, the Financial Action Task Force, to deny terrorists access to the world financial system.

⁷ An additional uranium enrichment facility near the city of Qom was identified in 2007 and brought to light in September 2009.

⁸ In 2003, the Libyan government announced abandonment of its weapons of mass destruction programs and the payment of almost \$3 billion in compensation to the families of Pan Am Flight 103. That country has since made efforts to normalize its ties with the European Union and the United States and has even coined the catchphrase, "The Libya Model," intended to show the world what can be achieved through negotiation rather than force.



U.S. Army (Kyle Davis)