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The Defeat-Deter Paradox: On the use of deterrence in U.S. counterterrorism efforts against Al-Qaeda

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The Defeat-Deter Paradox:

On the use of deterrence in U.S. counterterrorism efforts against Al-Qaeda

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1. Introduction

The resurrection of kamikaze tactics by al-Qaeda in the 21st century has stirred up a debate about the utility of deterrence in counterterrorism. The universal Cold War belief that adversaries could be deterred through an unprecedented build-up of nuclear and conventional weapons took an unbelievable blow after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American soil. Many observers raced to argue that the Cold War strategies of containment and deterrence had become fully irrelevant. Even the President's belief in these strategies was shaken. In 2006, when addressing the new recruits of the West Point Military Academy, President Bush explained that:

“The enemies we face today are different in many ways from the enemy we faced in the Cold War. In the Cold War, we deterred Soviet aggression through a policy of mutually assured destruction. Unlike the Soviet Union, the terrorist enemies we face today hide in caves and shadows -- and emerge to attack free nations from within. The terrorists have no borders to protect, or capital to defend. They cannot be deterred -- but they will be defeated” (2006a).

Or as then Under Secretary of State John Bolton put these fears more succinctly after 9/11: “A group that would ram airplanes into the World Trade Center [are] not going to be deterred by anything” (Broad et al., 2001). Overall, observers feared that the U.S. was now facing a new kind of enemy with thusfar unfamiliar characteristics that impeded the odds of ever successfully deterring them. The supposed difficulties were borne out of their fundamentalist religious convictions interrupting rational decision making, their nihilistic worldview lacking any clear strategic goals, and because most terrorist organizations lack a clear “return address” against which retaliatory threats can be issued and carried out (EOP, 2002). To this day, the idea of the impossibility of deterring religious zealots and fanatics has been hugely influential in both policy and academia. It has gained even more credence after the U.S. has pulled all of its troops and personnel from Afghanistan (down from 100,000 in 2011) without having dealt fatal blows to either the Taliban or al-Qaeda.

This thesis seeks to offer a new perspective on the difficulties of deterring terrorism in which the odds of deterring terrorists in the future are better than conventionally understood. The pitfall of existing studies on the failure of the U.S. to deter terrorists is that no studies have used empirical data from the terrorists' perspective. Instead, these studies largely depart from theoretical

assertions on deterrence, the motivation of terrorists, rational choice or the inner workings of terrorist cells. This lack of empirical data is especially wry because in its very essence, deterrence is a communicative process involving at least two actors. The proper study of deterrence requires not only attention to the deterrer's messages and actions, but also to the way the adversary interprets these messages and reacts to them. While this flaw in the literature can be explained by the fact that most of the existing studies were written before or during the height of the war on terror, leaving them with little empirical source material, the gap needs to be addressed nonetheless.

With the benefit of hindsight, this thesis aims to do so and in it, it uses the opportunity of a wealth of empirical data on communications between al-Qaeda members and leaders. These sources are accessible through the *Osama Bin Laden's Bookshelf* project by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). Between 2015 and 2017, they translated and released many of the documents the compound where Bin Laden last resided. Surprisingly, however, this unprecedented wealth has been left understudied. At most, existing studies have taken one or a few of the documents for a detailed study of them (Lahoud et al., 2012), or have used metadata sources to visualize Osama bin Laden's entire library (Hook & Gantchev, 2017). In this thesis, these sources on terrorist motivations and communications will be studied against the backdrop of the messages that were communicated to the terrorists by the U.S. government and its officials. Most importantly, the analysis seeks to uncover the implicit and explicit assumptions present in American speeches and documents about the rationality of terrorists and the difficulties of communicating with them. The validity of these assumptions will then be compared to the contents of the messages communicated by al-Qaeda between themselves and to the public. Studying both the communications of the deterrer and 'deterree' allows us to study the deterrence of counterterrorism as part of an actual communicative process involving two parties, rather than as a one-sided process involving only a sender and filling in the blanks on the adversary's side using abstracted theoretical insights.

The principal purpose of this thesis then is to gain a better understanding of the (im)possibility of deterring terrorists and the importance of clear communication within this process. Based on the analysis, this thesis suggests that the odds of deterring terrorists are much better than many politicians, policymakers and academics have concluded over the last two decades. The failure of the U.S. to successfully deter al-Qaeda did not result from the terrorists'

supposed lack of rationality and a “return address.” Rather, it mostly resulted from the U.S. being unwilling to fully commit to a policy of deterrence. Instead, they combined policies of deterrence with policies looking to fully destroy their terrorist adversary. As will be shown below, this combination of two incompatible policies set up any U.S. attempts of deterrence for failure.

The relevancy of the contribution made by this thesis is threefold. First, on an academic level, the discussion on deterrence and counterterrorism – as noted by others (Wilner, 2015a; Knopf, 2008; Miller, 2013) – is heavy on theory but short on rigorous empirical work. As previously stated, this gap is as lamentable as it is understandable given the covert nature of both terrorism and counterterrorism. However, recent years have seen a wealth of empirical data being published that allows us to pry open the terrorist black box and re-evaluate theoretical propositions by bringing back in source material. Second, and as a result of the emphasis put on theoretical assertions rather than empirical data thus far, most existing studies have not looked at the process of deterrence as a communicative process in which two parties are involved. Studies on American deterrent policies and public messages exist, but they do not go as far as studying the response to those messages. Lastly, the staying power of deterrence in American foreign and defense policy proves that our understanding of deterrence has important real-life consequences. And an improper or incomplete understanding of the effectiveness – or lack thereof – deterrence in counterterrorism can have adverse and unexpected consequences. In prying open the terrorist black box, this study aims to move the discussion on deterrence forward in such a way that it could inform future policy.

Before doing so, the existing literature on the topic of deterrence and its theoretical implications will first be laid out. This includes a brief study of the basic tenets of deterrence theory and the conditions for deterrence to be successful on the one hand, and a discussion of the various existing perspectives on the possibility (or lack thereof) of deterring terrorism on the other hand. This will be followed by a brief explanation of the methodology and source material used in this thesis. Thereafter, the analysis will proceed in two parts based on the two main challenges to deterring terrorists as understood by policymakers and observers, which are the terrorists’ supposed lack of rationality and a “return address.” The first part of the analysis is that of U.S. government sources (i.e. public speeches and policy documents), which will be analyzed for the assumptions in them and the messages that were sent to the adversaries of the U.S. through them. Second, the *Osama Bin Laden’s Bookshelf* documents will be used to understand the accuracy of U.S. assumptions about the nature of terrorists and the way that they received and interpreted U.S.

messaging. The thesis concludes with a chapter offering an alternative explanation for deterrence's failure against al-Qaeda, one that is based in the U.S. execution of its deterrence policy, rather than in the characteristics of terrorist groups.

2. Literature review

This chapter will discuss existing insights from the literature on deterrence in general and deterrence in counterterrorism efforts specifically. It will first look to establish a clear definition of deterrence by clarifying the conditions that need to be met for a military strategy to be considered as deterrence in the first place, before looking at other conditions that also need to be met for such a strategy to be successful. After this, the existing arguments raised both for and against the utility of deterrence in counterterrorism will be discussed in order to more accurately position the arguments put forward in this thesis.

2.1 *Conditions for successful deterrence*

Working with a clear definition of deterrence is important, because as others have argued, it sometimes appears that in the process of reconceptualizing deterrence for modern threats (e.g. terrorism, rogue states), some important conceptual distinctions have been lost in translation. In some ways, deterrence has been morphed into influence, resulting in the fact that any action aimed at manipulating the decision-making of an adversary can be traced back to the core principles of classic deterrence theory. Take the concepts of ‘deterrence’ and ‘defeat’ for example: the former looks to influence the adversary’s *desire* to continue fighting, while the latter looks to fully remove the adversary’s *ability* to continue fighting. While the practical consequences and end result may be the same, the conceptual difference is important. Crushing an enemy with brute force to the point that it cannot continue the fight is not deterrence (Wilner, 2015). Critics might be right in suggesting that this discussion is nitpicking and cavil, but the differences between the two concepts is essential to a thorough and precise understanding of deterrence theory.

Fundamentally, deterrence implies influencing an adversary’s cost-benefit calculation in hopes of altering their proposed behavior. It’s a strategic “game” where actors carefully consider the advantages and disadvantages of their actions based on the reaction that they expect from their adversaries. Or as Thomas Schelling explained it most succinctly: “deterrence means persuading a potential enemy that he should in his own interest avoid certain courses of activity” (1998, as cited in Wilner, 2015b). Within this process, there are two primary forces working in tandem: compellence and deterrence. And while the difference in practice is very subtle, Wilner explained the difference as being that the former “tries to change current behavior, while the latter tries to

dissuade a contemplated, but not yet taken, action” (2010, p. 314). For a strategy to be considered a deterrent strategy, it must contain “(a) a threat or action designed to increase an adversary’s perceived costs of engaging in particular behavior, and (b) an offer of an alternative state of affairs if the adversary refrains from the initially proposed behavior” (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2005, p. 94).

For a deterrent strategy to be effective, three other conditions also need to be met. First, the decision-making of all parties involved in the deterrence must sufficiently be subject to rational cost-benefit analysis and they must care about the fact that they are threatened. Second, the deterrer must be able to communicate its threat clearly. This also implies that the adversary must have a clear “return address” to which threats can be directed. And third, the assurance of an alternative state of affairs that accompanies the threat needs to be perceived as credible. In other words, to say ‘one more step and I’ll shoot,’ is only an effective deterrent if accompanied by the credible implicit or explicit assurance, ‘And if you stop I won’t’ (Wilner, 2010; Knopf, 2006). Deterrence will be ineffective if the adversary does not have any incentive to change its behavior in response to the deterrent threat because it anticipates retaliation regardless of its acquiescence.

This latter observation is crucial for the purpose of this thesis, as it was one of the main shortcomings of U.S. deterrence policy against al-Qaeda. Inaction or acquiescence on the adversary’s part must be answered by inaction on the deterrer’s part. Martha Crenshaw called this the “positive dimension to deterrence” (2001, p. 164), which implies that inaction on the adversary’s part would also result in a change of the deterrer’s behavior. Aiming both for deterrence as well as the total destruction of a single opponent is wholly incompatible. This is reflected in policy-relevant dilemmas, considering how the bargain may be lost because the terrorist adversary might be unable to distinguish coercive and deterrent threats communicated on the one hand and counterterrorist measures that promise to destroy them entirely on the other (Wilner, 2015a). Put differently, states need to show their capability to destroy the adversary, while also clearly communicating the willingness to restrain themselves and hold back. Both of these need to be communicated credibly and explicitly. The implicit assumption that a deterrent strategy therefore carries, is that the ultimate defeat of the adversary is not necessary for the deterrer’s future survival. By extension, the deterrer must acknowledge the adversary’s right to exist. And this acceptance of the adversary’s right to survive is part of what has made deterrence so hard in the fight against terrorists.

To summarize, for deterrence to work, the adversary must recognize the threat that has been issued, accurately (i.e. rationally) interpret the ramifications of a considered action, recognize which action(s) it is being deterred from, and be offered an alternative state of affairs if it does not carry out the behavior it is being deterred from (Wilner, 2010).

2.2 *Deterrence's skeptics*

After the Cold War and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, scholars increasingly argued that deterrence as a military strategy had become obsolete in the age of terrorism, because meeting all the above conditions for successful deterrence became an insurmountable problem for various reasons.

First, and most prominently, was the belief that the fundamentalist religious convictions of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda hinder their rational thinking, making deterrence a futile attempt. This view resonated especially well with policymakers, the public and academics alike shortly after the horrific images of planes crashing into landmark buildings in the U.S. were broadcast worldwide. Here was a group of terrorists willing to commit mass murder while sacrificing their own lives in the process. Unlike nationalist, Marxist, or separatist militants of the previous century, these terrorists were not motivated by worldly or political beliefs, but by religion (Miller, 2013). As American terrorism expert Bruce Hoffmann put it: “For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty executed in response to some theological demand or imperative.” (2006, p. 15). In their own eyes, Hoffmann argues, al-Qaeda’s suicide terrorists are martyrs fulfilling their religious duty, not indoctrinated foot soldiers. The problem, as summarized by the prominent political commentator Fareed Zakaria in 2003, was as follows: “The religious orientation of the Islamists breaks down deterrence. How do you deter someone who is willing, indeed eager, to die?” What is there left to threaten for a deterrer if not the lives of their adversary – the ultimate threat in deterrence? From a secular Western understanding, modern terrorists seemingly weigh the costs and benefits of their actions in a less-than-rational process.

Second, and extending from the previous argument about terrorist rationality, skeptics such as Hoffmann and Boaz Ganor remarked that deterring terrorists is impossible because they have no interest in preserving the status quo, meaning that any reassurances offered by the deterrer will prove to be futile (Ganor, 2005; Hoffmann, 2006). As the former CIA director James Woolsey noted: “Today’s terrorists don’t want a seat at the table; they want to destroy the table and everyone

sitting at it” (2002, as cited in 9/11 Commission, 2004). Deemed to be lacking any strategic end goal, it would be impossible to appease terrorists by offering an alternative state of affairs (i.e. Crenshaw’s ‘positive dimension of deterrence’) in case they would not take a considered course of action. Instead, terrorists destroy for destroying’s sake, and they kill for killing’s sake. “Unlike the terrorists of the past, modern terrorists have no sense of morality, a self-image, operational codes, and practical concerns,” argues terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins (2006, 118). In this sense, 9/11 represented “a ‘symbolic drama’ with no strategic or tactical goals in mind” (2006, 121). It was about the fulfilment of ‘radical Islam’s collective fantasy’; winning a battle or the war was only a secondary or tertiary objective. Without a moral compass or a strategic rudder to guide them, terrorists will never be deterred.

The third criticism, raised most prominently by authors such as Gregory Miller and Brian Jenkins, against the use of deterrence in counterterrorist strategies is that these organizations lack a “return address” (i.e. a public leader, ‘home base’ or clearly delineated territory) against which a retaliatory threat can be issued and carried out (Miller, 2012; Davis & Jenkins, 2002). During the Cold War, threats were communicated clearly between both Washington and Moscow. In this period of interstate deterrence, threats were levied against the adversary’s territory, sovereignty, population, military infrastructure and so on, and those threats were credible because of the destructive power of nuclear weapons (Wilner, 2015b). With terrorists, however, it is hard to be certain whether the coercive communication was received and understood. And even if the threat has been communicated and received clearly, terrorists rarely control territory or public institutions against which the threats can be carried out. As a result, the return address becomes both a communicative as well as a tactical problem. In the rare case that terrorists do have territory to rule over, it almost always rests within the national boundaries of another sovereign state, complicating the threats and operations that the United States could carry out against them (Pape, 2003). The 2002 U.S. *National Security Strategy* aptly noted that “[t]raditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy ... whose most potent protection is statelessness” (EOP, 2002). Even if high-value leaders are identified by the U.S., they remain difficult to find because the terrorist groups operate in secret, meaning that even highly accurate and destructive weapon systems in possession of the U.S. would remain impotent against such targets.

2.3 *Deterrence skepticism revisited*

Put together, the above arguments suggest that any deterrent counterterrorist efforts will prove to be fully ineffectual at the outset. However, in recent years, many scholars have increasingly argued for a more nuanced examination of this problem. Most prominently, Alex Wilner has suggested that while terrorists may be fanatical and led by religious beliefs, they are “rational fanatics” nevertheless (2015b, p. 7). Or as the late Israeli scholar of political violence, Ehud Sprinzak, noted: “The perception that terrorists are undeterrable fanatics who are willing to kill indiscriminately, belies the reality that they are cold, rational killers” (2000, p. 68) that use violence as a way to achieve hierarchically ordered and defined social and political objectives. Because although individual terrorists might embrace extremist ideologies and the violence resulting from it, the organizations that they are a part of have strategic goals and priorities. Terrorism, even if counterintuitively, is purposeful and calculated violence. Even the suicide bomber willingly dying for some higher cause, to some extent, is acting rationally. To see how this is true, Mia Bloom in her book *Dying to Kill* argues that we need to “disaggregate [terrorist organizations] into two levels of analysis – the individual bombers who blow themselves up and the organizations that send them” (Bloom, 2005, p. 81). In a way, both the bomber and the organization are acting rationally because they are opting for – what they see as – the most effective way to achieve their personal or political goals. Despite it being hard to see the rationality behind forfeiting one’s life for any purpose at all, this observation has important ramifications for the use of deterrence theory in counterterrorism. Because if all terrorism, even suicide terrorism, is the result of rational calculations to varying degrees, then an important condition for successfully deterring terrorists can actually be met if the right leverages are found and employed (Wilner, 2015b).

Those leverages can be found by opening up the “black box” of terrorist organizations to understand what deterrers can threaten, other than the lives of individual terrorists. Because while terrorists may be stateless and in hiding, they are not asset-less. As argued by Michael Quinlan, there has been no state, organization, or similar grouping that had no interest for its own survival, for the lives of its members or its assets which it wanted to retain (2004, p. 14). And if such concerns exist, then it is possible to identify and threaten them in an effort to alter terrorist behavior. As organizations, terrorists have financial assets, equipment, personnel, training facilities, friends and allies, and storage places that can be threatened. Moreover, terrorists have immaterial assets that can be threatened such as their aspirations and goals that they do not want

to jeopardize unnecessarily. And they have ideas and beliefs that they deem worthy of upholding and protecting (Wilner, 2015b). These assets are all part of what terrorists value and safeguard, meaning that threats levied against those assets should deter terrorists. Certainly, traditional deterrent concepts such as mutually assured destruction (MAD) and land-based threats will not be as effective as they were in the Cold War, but this should not be reason to write off deterrence theory at large.

Most importantly, proponents of deterrence's utility in counterterrorism, such as Wilner, argue that we need to "move from the holistically abstract capital-T Terrorism to the distinctive functional parts of the terrorist system, meaning the strategic and religious leaders, the recruiters, foot soldiers, financiers, suicide bombers and so on" (Wilner, 2010, p. 40). The problem with existing studies, however, is that while they identify this need to move away from theoretical considerations and abstract understandings, many of them fall short themselves because of a lack of empirical evidence. This thesis aims to change this and contribute to the existing debate. In doing so, it looks to solidify existing studies on deterrence's utility in counterterrorism by supporting those arguments with much needed empirical evidence. At the same time, the aim is to move away from arguments that write off deterrence as being set up for failure by definition. Instead, it is necessary to look at how the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the continued aggression of Al-Qaeda against the United States, rather than being a failure of deterrence, were a failure to *apply* deterrence. Because although the difference might sound negligible, it has some radical implications.

3. Methodology

The following chapter briefly discusses the source material that was used, the collection process, and the way it was analyzed. In all this, as mentioned before, the main aim of this thesis is to bring back the ‘receiver’ of deterrent messages into the study of deterrence as a two-sided communicative process. Evidently then, the arguments made need to be supported by sources from both sides of the conflict. For the U.S. side of this process, government sources such as the National Security Strategy and public speeches by government officials between 2001 and 2011 were used. For the al-Qaeda side, the sources made available through the *Osama Bin Laden’s Bookshelf* project were consulted.

The latter sources were made available in four tranches between May 20, 2015 and January 19, 2017 as part of a project by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. In the weeks following the raid on Bin Laden’s compound, U.S. Intelligence services sifted through the documents that were found and translated large parts of it. A total of 265 translated documents were declassified and published on the ODNI’s website, totalling some 1,266 pages. The published documents vary from personal letters to family, friends, and other al-Qaeda leaders to *fatwas* (a legal opinion on Islamic law), bank statements, and transcripts of public appearances by Bin Laden. While some of these documents are dated before the War on Terror, the vast majority of them range from 2001 to 2011. Especially important to this study are documents that show al-Qaeda’s reception of and response to American messages.

Besides the translated documents that were published by the ODNI, the *Bookshelf Project* also lists the trove of other documents and media that were found inside the compound. These range from software manuals, world maps, entertainment magazines to extremist literature. Many of these documents seem rather trivial and irrelevant to our current purposes, and sometimes even ridiculous, such as the suicide prevention guide *Is It the Heart You Are Asking?* However, among the documents are also many books, media articles, think tank studies, and publicly available U.S. government documents. Among these are the *9/11 Commission Report*, Congressional research reports, the 2005 *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* report by the NSC, transcripts of speeches by U.S. government officials, and books such as Bob Woodward’s *Obama’s Wars*. These documents form a key part to asserting that al-Qaeda was actively receiving and engaging with American discourse, policy, and strategy. This is not to say that they were actively steering the

discourse, but they were listening, which is one of the key conditions for deterrence to be successful.

Despite the wealth of information provided by these documents, however, there are two important challenges to working with these types of documents. First, about one-fifth (55 out of 265) of the documents are either not properly dated or have an unknown author. However, in some cases the content of the document can still be used to establish the relationship of the author to the addressee put it within certain date range based on the events mentioned in it. The second challenge is that from an outside position it is hard to fully establish the provenance, integrity and completeness of every single document. While the ODNI sifted through these documents and translated many of them, there is no guarantee about the documents' authenticity or about the truthfulness of the content within the letters. Moreover, the translated documents do not paint the entire picture. Another large share of documents found in the raid were published in Arabic on November 1, 2017, but there are no public translations of these documents available in English (CIA, 2017). As such, the use of these documents is not entirely unproblematic, but they do provide one of the largest insights into the inner workings and communications of a large terrorist organization. Even more so because some of the documents were never meant for the public eye, allowing for a very private look inside the minds of al-Qaeda and its leaders.

The second set of sources, that on the U.S. government and its deterrent messaging, was selected partly based on the content provided by the OBLB letters. Many of the al-Qaeda letters, and especially the speech transcripts by Bin Laden himself, directly refer to public appearances of U.S. government officials and the policy documents underpinning their War on Terror. For example, in a 2003 text by Bin Laden argues that "in his speech, Bush made four broad claims, broader than the distance between East and West," before explaining what they are and dismissing them. The claims mentioned directly refer to President Bush's State of the Union address of that year. In another letter, Bin Laden writes to his sister that "The media released the speech of President Obama that he would withdraw the American forces from Afghanistan after six months" (OBLB, n.d. -d). Furthermore, the OBLB website also lists 75 publicly available U.S. government documents that were found in the compound. Among this list are reports by the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, speeches by government officials, Congress reports and U.S. policy documents. These documents are further complemented by a selection of documents that most directly represent the American counterterrorism and military policy as a whole. These are the National

Security Strategy, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, speeches by both presidents from 2001-2011 and Department of Defense documents such as the 2006 *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept*. The weight on these documents is mostly put on the period under the Bush Administration (2000-2008), because the majority of OBLB letters are from this period.

After the collection process, both sets of documents were analyzed integrally. The U.S. government documents and speeches were analyzed through a close consideration of the messages conveyed in those documents (both implicitly and explicitly). Rather than accepting *prima facie* that the U.S. successfully ‘carried out’ deterrence – and blaming its failure on the recipients – it seeks to critically assess its deterrent messaging and the role it played in the failure to deter al-Qaeda. As for the OBLB documents, all letters and documents were read and analyzed, but not all of the 265 documents were of use for this thesis’ purposes. Ultimately, a selection of 25 letters was used more extensively based on the fact that they related to the arguments raised by skeptics of deterrence’s utility in counterterrorism efforts. Those arguments being that a) terrorists would be irrational; b) lack any political or strategic goals; and c) and lack a clear ‘return address’ against which threats can be issued and carried out. The letters were studied to test the above theoretical propositions and whether there are indeed visible traces of blinding religious fanaticism, irrational calculations, and a lack of awareness of being part of a ‘game’ of deterrence. Moreover, the documents would need to support the idea the messages sent by the U.S. never even reached their adversary. And lastly, both sets of documents were also analyzed in order to discern and develop a better explanation for deterrence’s failure in counterterrorism, which will be laid out in the final chapter of this thesis and will be its primary contribution to the existing debate.

4. Government documents and public speeches

The following chapter deals with the implicit and explicit assumptions present in U.S. government documents and public speeches on terrorism. It is structured along the lines of the aforementioned arguments raised against deterrence's utility in counterterrorism. The first part concerns the claims about the terrorists' supposed lack of rationality and political or strategic goals, and the second part contains the "return address" problem raised by skeptics in politics and academia alike. The documents and speeches used reveal that the U.S. government had little faith in successfully deterring al-Qaeda as a new and thus far unknown enemy.

4.1 *Terrorist rationality*

Despite the fact that both the Bush and Obama administration still relied heavily on deterrence as a military and national defense strategy, the skepticism about actually deterring their terrorist adversary pervades in policy documents and public speeches by both presidents. Like in the literature, the main concern raised about al-Qaeda is their supposed lack of rationality. In this context, rationality would imply that they are goal oriented and weigh their available strategies according to these goals and their preferences. They consider their budgetary constraints, their total resources available and the costs and benefits of both legal and illegal activities. Included in these cost-benefit calculations would be the risk of being caught or killed by their adversaries. Strategies would be changed based on altering circumstances and they would refrain from behavior that hinders the fulfilment of their goals (Wenzlaff, 2016). In the eyes of president Bush, however, few of these conditions apply to al-Qaeda because of their religious fundamentalist nature and their totalitarian worldview. Al-Qaeda are considered a terrorist organization who "have hijacked the noble religion of Islam" in search of imposing a totalitarian ideology on millions and the leaders are "not religious leaders, they are killers" (2008a). These killers are "driven by a perverted vision of Islam" (2006c) which they are abusing in their fight against the U.S. This perverted vision of Islam complicates the assumption of rationality and therefore the process of deterrence.

The first complicating factor is the terrorists' attitude towards death in multiple ways. Most importantly, terrorists are thought to show a wanton disregard for their own lives. This contempt for their own lives is most clearly illustrated by the use of suicide bombings as a tactic. As President Bush explained in his first State of the Union Address after the 9/11 attacks: "Our

enemies send other people's children on missions of suicide and murder. They embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed” (2002a). In another State of the Union address five years later, Bush reiterated these same ideas by quoting both Bin Laden and Zarqawi as saying “We will sacrifice our blood and bodies to put an end to your dreams” and “Death is better than living on this on this Earth with the unbelievers among us” respectively (2007). These same sentiments were echoed in national defense policy documents, most succinctly in the 2002 National Security Strategy which held that “[t]raditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy ... whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death” (EOP, 2002, p. 19). The fear of the U.S. in both these speeches and documents is that the possibility of ever deterring their adversary breaks down if even death itself, the ultimate threat in deterrence, is no longer seen as a threat.

Further complicating the issue in the eyes of the U.S. is not only the terrorists’ disregard of their own lives, but also that of innocent citizens. Al-Qaeda draws on their twisted interpretation of Islam to “justify the murder of both Muslim and non-Muslim innocents” (EOP, 2011, p. 9). They kill without scruples, “preach with threats, instruct with bullets and bombs and are promised paradise for the murder of the innocent” (Bush, 2007). Shortly after the attacks on American soil, president Bush noted that Americans had “seen the depth of our enemies’ hatred in videos, where they laugh about the loss of innocent life. And the depth of their hatred is equalled by the madness of the destruction they design” (Bush, 2002a). The latter part gets to the core of why deterring al-Qaeda will prove difficult, because destruction is what they ‘design.’ The terrorists seemingly have no other tangible goals or interests that the U.S. could threaten in an attempt to deter them. Al-Qaeda has no territory to defend, assets to protect or national aspirations that the U.S. could target. Destruction and sowing death are al-Qaeda’s tactic and goal at the same time.

The ultimate manifestation of this, according to Bush, is the desire of al-Qaeda to acquire weapons of mass destruction. As explained by the president: “Whatever slogans they chant, when they slaughter the innocent, they have the same wicked purposes. They want to kill Americans, and gain the weapons to kill on an even more horrific scale” (2007). In policy documents and speeches, this desire to acquire WMDs is contrasted to the security environment of the Cold War in which the U.S. faced an adversary that actually possessed WMDs. What sets al-Qaeda apart from the Soviet Union, however, is the fact that the latter was “a generally status quo, risk-averse adversary” (EOP, 2002, p. 19). In contrast, this new adversary has a “greater likelihood that they will actually use WMDs” (EOP, 2002, p. 17). The expectation set by the U.S. is that al-Qaeda will

“use chemical, biological and nuclear weapons the moment they are capable of doing so. No hint of conscience would prevent it” (Bush, 2001b). The same threats of retaliation that deterred the Soviet enemy are much less likely to work against an enemy “more willing to take risks and gambling with the lives of their people” (Bush, 2001b). The U.S. is “now threatened by the potential spread of nuclear weapons to extremists who may not be deterred from using them” (EOP, 2010).

The destructive and irrational spirit of al-Qaeda is further emphasized in speeches and documents by contrasting the “harsh and narrow totalitarian ideology” (Bush, 2007) of the terrorists to everything that the U.S. and its allies stand for. Where the terrorists “embrace tyranny and death as a cause and a creed” the U.S. “stands for a different choice, made long ago, on the day of our founding. We choose freedom and the dignity of every life.” Moreover, “unlike the enemy, we seek to minimize, not maximize, the loss of innocent life” (Bush, 2001b). In the documents, the U.S. paints itself in familiar terms of a nation that honors the rights of man, defends democracy and seeks to maintain global peace. And to understand the nature of al-Qaeda you only have to ‘take any principle of civilization, and their goal is the opposite’ (Bush, 2007) and they “oppose every principle of humanity and decency that we hold dear” (Bush, 2008b).

In short, the U.S. saw itself as facing a new kind of enemy that represents the total opposite of everything they believe in; that has a totally different rationality compared to the enemy they successfully deterred in the Cold War; that has seemingly no discernible strategic goals or aspiration; and that ends the lives of innocents and themselves without scruples.

4.2 The “return address” problem

Complicating deterrence even further in the eyes of the U.S. government is another practical problem, which is that – put simply – they are hard to find. So even if the U.S. were to successfully understand terrorist rationality and identify strategic targets that the terrorists value, this problem would break down deterrence regardless. Terrorist organizations in the modern age were thought to consist of shadowy networks that operate simultaneously at a sub-state and a supranational level without defending a clearly delineated territory and an open command structure. As a result, terrorists have no clear ‘return address’ against which threats can be levied and retaliation be visited. The U.S. could possess any number of highly accurate weapon systems, but without having a clear sense of where to aim them, they remain impotent as part of deterrence (Stone, 2009).

Consequently, terrorists can operate with impunity, knowing that they will most likely not be targeted effectively. This concern is also strongly reflected in U.S. government documents and speeches by both presidents.

In traditional – or interstate – deterrence, threats can be issued against territorial targets, meaning an adversary’s territory, sovereignty, industrial base, military infrastructure or population centers. Those threats are considered credible because adversaries are aware of each other’s destructive power and ability to strike at will. As stated in the 2002 NSS, however, these “traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy...whose most potent protection is statelessness” (2002, p. 19). These sub-state terrorist networks “represent no nation, they defend no territory, and they wear no uniform” (Bush, 2006b). And again, president Bush most clearly illustrates this problem by contrasting the new adversary to the Soviet Union by arguing that “deterrence – the promise of massive retaliation against nations – means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.” From the shadows, these terrorists “conspire in secret, and they strike without warning. They do not mass armies on borders, or flotillas of warships on the high seas. They operate in the shadows of society; they send small teams of operatives to infiltrate free nations; and they live quietly among their victims” (2006a).

Further complicating the issuing of threats is that even if terrorists may sometimes rule over some swaths of land – such as in Afghanistan and Pakistan – these territories almost always rest within the border of internationally recognized sovereign states, as was the case with al-Qaeda. Such safe havens have been offered to the terrorists by other states “whether through ignorance, inability, or intent.” Once they are able to get a foothold in “a safe operating environment, the organization can begin to solidify and expand” (EOP, 2003, p. 6).

This expansion was done successfully by Al-Qaeda partly because of the way they “twisted the benefits and conveniences of our increasingly open, integrated, and modernized world to serve their destructive agenda.” As a result, the “terrorist threat of today is mutating into something quite different from its predecessors” (EOP, 2003, p. 6). Whereas previous terrorist adversaries were often bound to a clearly delineated territory and a single organization, al-Qaeda were enabled by technological advances to become a “multinational enterprise with operations in more than 60 countries” with leadership, funds, training and semi-autonomous cells being dispersed not only regionally, but globally (EOP, 2006, p. 14). The open borders across the world of the 21st century made the ‘establishment and movement of cells in virtually any country relatively easy in a world

where ... millions of people cross international borders every day.' It allowed members of al-Qaeda to travel internationally "with the ease of a vacationer or business traveller" (EOP, 2003, p. 12). Moreover, new technologies allowed al-Qaeda to "communicate across the same internet paths we use each day" and to share intelligence using "encrypted e-mails, internet chat rooms and CD-roms" (EOP, 2003, p. 6-7). And "like a skilled publicist" (EOP, 2006, p. 16) Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were able to exploit the internet and international media outlets to profess their message worldwide.

One of main defense objectives that was laid out in the 2003 NSCT as a result of this problem was to first locate terrorists and their organizations. The shadowy and elusive nature of these organizations precludes a classic net assessment of the enemy "based on the number of tanks, airplanes, or ships does not apply to these non-state actors" (EOP, 2003, p. 16). For intelligence efforts to be successful in the war on terror, the U.S. needed to move away from merely technical intelligence towards types of intelligence to "get inside the organizations, locate their sanctuaries, and disrupt their plans and operations" (EOP, 2003, p. 16). Under the Bush administration, this meant the instalment of military tribunals where accused terrorists would be tried. Bush argued that they were needed to "protect the United States and its citizens... and to prevent terrorists attacks" (2006b). Because terrorists "conspire in secret and strike without warning", and the "most important source of information on where the terrorists are hiding and their plans is the terrorists, themselves" (2006b). Captured terrorists have unique knowledge about the inner workings, capabilities and intents of their organizations that cannot be found in any other place. To win the war, Bush argued that they had the right, and plight, to "detain, question, and, when appropriate, prosecute terrorists captured here in America, and on the battlefields around the world" (2006b). One of the sites where this happened was at Guantanamo Bay, which Bush defended by arguing that the interrogation program had played a crucial role in understanding and locating their enemies. Terrorists in the program had "painted a picture of al Qaeda's structure and financing, and communications and logistics. They identified al Qaeda's travel routes and safe havens, and explained how al Qaeda's senior leadership communicates with its operatives in places like Iraq" (2006b). Despite this intel, however, the U.S. remained unsure about their ability to locate all of al-Qaeda.

Overall, the U.S. government documents and speeches analyzed in this chapter reveal the discomfort caused by a new adversary that is not yet understood. The doubts about the rationality

of terrorists coupled with the U.S. being unable to physically locate terrorists and communicate with them made deterrence seem like a dauntingly impossible task. The importance of understanding the government discourse on the possibility deterring terrorists is based in the fact that the underlying assumptions will inform important policy and strategy decisions. And misinformed assumptions will lead to misinformed policies that greatly decrease the chances of success, as will be argued in the final chapter of this thesis.

5. Osama Bin Laden's Bookshelf Documents

Before moving on to that part of the analysis, however, we first need to establish the extent to which the above assumptions made by the U.S. government hold up when contrasted to the sources of the *Bookshelf Project*, which will be done in the current chapter. Based on the previous chapter, we would expect to find in the documents evidence of an undeterred enemy blinded by religious fanaticism, showing a disregard for their own lives and that of others while being fully unaware of American advances and communication.

5.1 OBLB Documents

At first glance, some of the documents seemingly do support the aforementioned view of al-Qaeda. In a few of the documents the fight against the U.S. is discussed using Quran verses, calls for jihad and calls upon Muslim people to make sacrifices. Such documents initially might support the idea of a rationality that is different from that of Americans. One such letter is signed by Bin Laden in which he calls upon Muslim brothers across the globe to “seek the help of God and rely on Him, and do your best to be among the first martyrs who give their hearts for the sake of the religion” because “the flame of polytheism can only be extinguished by shedding blood.” The Mujahidin are further called upon to kill “those who respond to America by coming to the Muslim world to do any supportive work”, because those people are “a Crusader and must be killed, even if the visit was under false names like peacekeeping and demining” (OBLB, n.d. -j). Moreover, the problem of the return address is also illustrated in letters sent to and by Bin Laden that discuss ways of remaining in the shadows. Writing to his son in regards to making any media appearances, Bin Laden explains that “at this time, and for the indefinite future, we should not be present in the media, owing to our remaining hidden and to security, and to avoid the monitoring by spies” (OBLB, 2010c). Such internal deliberations on the need to be fearless, to become a martyr and the need to operate in secret indeed seem to confirm the U.S. view of al-Qaeda that was discussed in the previous chapter.

A more thorough examination of the letters and documents found in Bin Laden's compound, however, suggests a different reality. One that questions the idea of an undeterrable organization that kills indiscriminately while remaining in the shadows. Rather, it shows a reality in which al-Qaeda is an organization that may speak in religious terms, but has clearly defined

political objectives. Their motivation is fuelled by power rather than by religious conviction. And the supposed total disregard for human lives is passionately disputed between Bin Laden and other leaders. The documents show a clear desire to live from al-Qaeda's leaders. And the terrorists' fear of falling victim to spying and targeted killings show that the U.S. was able to find a return address against which retaliatory threats could be visited. And lastly, in many of the letters, Bin Laden himself is directly responding to words uttered by both U.S. presidents and their administration officials, proving that they were in fact listening to U.S. rhetoric and deterrent messages.

5.1.1 Rationality: fear of death

Primarily, the OBLB documents show that al-Qaeda's leaders are willing to sacrifice others in suicide missions, but only few of them are eager to put themselves in harm's way. The letters show the lengths to which al-Qaeda's leaders are going to keep themselves, their families and their organization safe. The tactic that had done the most to instil this fear is the American use of drones (and planes) to survey the area and to carry out targeted killings. The implications of this for the prospect of deterring terrorists cannot be overstated, because it means their desire to live can be leveraged in an attempt to deter them. A similar point has been made by Alex Wilner on a theoretical level. In his article on deterrence and counterterrorism he argued that, "theoretically speaking, targeted killings represent a cost to planning and participating in terrorism that produce an individualized psychological effect with deterrent results" (2010, p. 314). This psychological effect should be the strongest when the threat is perceived as credible. In contrast to traditional interstate deterrence, where the credibility of one state relies on clearly communicated declarations signalling their capabilities, deterrence in counterterrorism is most clearly demonstrated by the repeated use of capabilities (2010, p. 315). As a result of this coercive threat, terrorists leaders are then forced to allocate their time and resources in evading their own death instead of being able plan that of others (Wilner, 2010).

These theoretical propositions by Wilner are supported by the documents of the OBLB project. When reading them, it is hard to note the fear that dominated much of the daily lives of Bin Laden and other al-Qaeda operatives. The idea that they would be willing, or eager even, to die is dispelled rather quickly. In a letter from 2010 addressed at Abu Zubair, an al-Qaeda leader in Somalia, Bin Laden writes that: "Over the last two years, the problem of the spying war and spying aircrafts benefited the enemy greatly and led to the killing of many jihadi cadres, leaders,

and others. This is something that is concerning us and exhausting us” (OBLB, n.d. -l). In another letter, Bin Laden speaks of ‘the U.S. B-52 bombers that are bringing us dignity and teaching us freedom and democracy according to the slaves of America’ (OBLB, n.d. -h). As a result of this, “the jihadists are unable to appear openly in the streets because doing so would call down air strikes upon them and would lead to the destruction of their lives and areas” (OBLB, n.d. -b). This fear is further increased because ‘the Americans, their spies and their spy aircraft can work under any conditions’ and “their plans are to kill or snipe our leaders anywhere, please do not give them the chance” (OBLB, 2011b).

In other letters, Bin Laden and his cadre discuss the security measures that should be taken in response to this omnipresent threat of spy planes and bomb drones. Bin Laden writes that “the American technology and advanced systems cannot capture a mujahid if he does not make a security violation that will lead them to him. Commitment to operational security makes his technological advancement a waste. Security procedures in our circumstances should be practiced at all times and there is no room for mistakes” (OBLB, 2011b). These security procedures include such things as only “changing safe houses on cloudy days”; not sending e-mails “because the enemy can easily monitor all e-mail traffic” and because “encryption systems work with ordinary people, but not against those who created e-mail and the internet”; not being “present in the media ... to avoid the monitoring by spies”; and not “allowing kids to go outside in cities” (OBLB, 2010e). The resultant paranoia quickly spreads among the ranks of al-Qaeda and even their families. This is most aptly illustrated in a letter that Bin Laden wrote to his wife in January 2011 in which he orders her to “go to the doctor and complain about the filling in your molar and ask to have the filling replaced” (OBLB, 2011a) because he fears that a SIM card might have been implanted under her skin while visiting the dentist.

Wilner further theorizes that a string of successful targeted killings not only leads to despair among surviving leaders, but also has important knock-on effects for the ease with which an organization can attract and retain new followers. Those “next in line for succession take a long time to step into their predecessors’ shoes. They know that by stepping forward, they add their names to a target list” (2010, p. 314). Once on the list, life will be Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, and short. As a result, targeted killings increase the costs of joining a terrorist organization so significantly that it might deter some from doing so. These propositions are also supported by the findings from the OBLB documents. In a 2010 letter, Bin Laden writes to his family that ‘the

situation has become difficult because of an increase of spies and drones to the point that the entire atmosphere is polluted' (OBLB, 2010d). This "intense pressure on us in the theatre of operations resulted in fear among those who helped us and their retreat from assisting us" (OBLB, 2010d). Consequently, Bin Laden mentioned "a sharp decrease in recruits, capabilities and a decline in the number of operations" (OBLB, n.d. -k). This decrease is also noticeable amongst the higher-ranking personnel of which Bin Laden writes that "we have lost cadre and leaders [...] and I fear this may be from the fleeing and the slow progress" (OBLB, 2010c). The difficulties are exemplified in Bin Laden's futile attempts to retain and attract personnel a personal security cadre – a job that would usually be seen as reputable and prestigious. Of his existing cadre, Bin Laden writes that "I have been living for years in the company of some of the brothers from the area and they are getting exhausted – security wise – from me staying with them and what results from that" (OBLB, n.d. -o). To his wife, he writes that he has tried his hardest to get his personnel to cooperate in getting his family to visit him, but "sadly, I came to realize that they have reached a level of exhaustion that they are shutting down, and they asked to leave us all" (OBLB, n.d. -o). Replacing the existing cadre with new recruits is also proving to be tough because most 'people are not disciplined enough to take up the enormous task.' In fact, in 2010, Bin Laden thinks that "no one is completely ready to take charge right now" (OBLB, 2010c).

In short, the documents paint a picture of al-Qaeda leaders that might be inspired by martyrdom – but not their own (or that of their families). The existing fear of death among al-Qaeda's members, and the resulting deterrent effect on attracting new recruits questions the idea of them being irrational killers and increases the odds of successfully deterring them. Ironically, U.S. government officials did recognize the impact that targeted killings were having. In May of 2009, CIA Director Leon Panetta confirmed that "the enemy is really, really struggling. This last year has been a very hard year for them. They're losing a bunch of their better leaders. But more importantly, at this point they're wondering who's next" (Williams, 2010, p. 878).

5.1.2 Rationality: indiscriminate killings and lack of strategic goals

Despite this recognition of the effects of targeted killings, however, the U.S. remained indeterminate about the efficacy of deterrence because they thought that regardless of whether al-Qaeda members fear for their own lives, they would still not squander any opportunity to inflict a meaningless loss of lives on their adversary's part. As theorized by John Stone, however, this idea

of terrorists being fanatics who are willing to kill indiscriminately might belie a reality in which terrorists use seemingly senseless violence to achieve hierarchically ordered social and political goals. Terrorism, even if counterintuitively, is purposeful and calculated violence geared towards political purposes, sometimes clad in religious terms (Stone, 2009). In history, there has been no state or non-state organization that has had no collective concern whatsoever for the survival of its own regime and the fulfilment of their aspirations and goals. So too does al-Qaeda have political objectives, that might be religiously motivated, but they are political objectives nonetheless. The implications of this for the odds of deterring terrorists are important, because if such concerns exist, then they can be held at risk by the deterrer.

What then is the goal that underlies these killings? This is most clearly answered in a letter sent to Bin Laden by Ayman al-Zawahiri – the chief strategist of al-Qaeda under Bin Laden – in which he writes: “Our objective is: America has to stop its evil ... and leave the Muslims alone so they can establish an Islamic state where Islam will prevail ... We want to fight to force the enemy to stop its aggression against us, by fighting the United States” (OBLB, 2007a). Over the next few paragraphs, al-Zawahiri explains why they need to resort to terrorist tactics to achieve their goal of a U.S. retreat from the Arab world. He recognizes that the “command post for the operations against us” are the White House and Congress, but ultimately, it is the “American people who have the power to stop this war as soon as possible.” To achieve change, he suggests to put U.S. citizens “under direct pressure by using the equation of fear. [Which] can only happen by directly affecting the American people through conducting operations inside America” (OBLB, 2007a). Conducting terrorist attacks against and inside the U.S. “is the number one objective and the main way to lead us to what we want ... It is the people’s anger against the decision makers in the White House, the Congress, and the Pentagon that will shut the doors of the dam, God willing” (OBLB, 2007a).

This argument of focusing on the U.S. as the main enemy is further reinforced in a 30-page letter addressed at ‘Abu Basir’, the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), urging him to not open any new fronts and to focus on the U.S. as the main adversary. Bin Laden instructs him to ‘direct every arrow and every mine that can target Americans while there are others toward the Americans rather than NATO or others’ (OBLB, 2008). He then compares the enemy to a ‘wicked tree’ of which the trunk is the U.S. and the branches are NATO and other allied organizations. Because al-Qaeda has no resources to waste, they should focus on bringing the tree down by focusing on the American trunk. As cutting deep enough into the trunk would bring down

the other branches as well. The pressure on the U.S. needs to be increased “until the balance of horror is achieved and the cost of occupying and dominating becomes greater than its benefits” (OBLB, 2008) and they are forced to withdraw from the Muslim world. This does not mean that al-Qaeda members get a blank check to attack the U.S., as Bin Laden urges Abu Basir that any opportunities to inflict damage on the enemy “should be assessed accurately, without exaggeration ... to evaluate the balance of gains and losses as well as the reaction ... on the basis of science that is far from superstition and random assessments” (OBLB, 2008). The reason for this being that a lapse in rational judgment will lead to “very serious issues, the greatest of which is the bloodshed and ordeals that will be inflicted on people without achieving the goal. Therefore, blood should not be shed unless we have evidence to show that ... achieving such goals is worthy of shedding such blood” (OBLB, 2008).

To be sure, the restraint shown in regard to the loss of innocent lives does not come from a benevolent attitude towards the U.S. Instead, the restraint is mostly shown in order to not alienate the Muslim community worldwide on whose support al-Qaeda is dependent in establishing an Islamic caliphate. Bin Laden’s personal stance on the supposed use of indiscriminate killings is most clearly represented in a letter titled ‘Dear Muslim brothers and sisters.’ In which he writes the following:

“What compelled me to write these few words to you was the many accusations directed against the jihadi movement by the enemy and the media. [The mujahidin have been accused] of killing Muslims and they have been portrayed as killers who are only interested in spilling blood, looting, and pilfering money, and of having no dignified goal, honorable purpose, political strategy, or anything similar to this. However, they lie (2006).”

He continues to explain that these accusations misrepresent al-Qaeda and its movement, because they are bound by the Sharia law, which forbids killing anyone except “for the requirements of justice” (OBLB, 2006). No matter how “oppressive or arrogant the enemy is”, or how much revenge and hatred the enemy has gathered from wars, it is more important to al-Qaeda and its members to win the approval of God. To this end, Bin Laden ‘calls upon his brothers, the Mujahidin, wherever they are’ to “prevent explosions and using methods that kill generally and indiscriminately” (OBLB, 2006). In another letter titled ‘To the American people’ from 2007, Bin Laden reaffirms his stance by writing that “we do not fight for mere killing but to stop the killing of our people. It is a sin to kill a person without proper, justifiable cause, but terminating his killer

is a right” (OBLB, 2007d). Thus, in a twist of irony, al-Qaeda considers the U.S. as the party that “kills innocents openly and pours on them burning, penetrating, melting lava; it destroys villages along with their people and does not care who is in them” (OBLB, 2010a).

Evidently, these statements by Bin Laden and al-Qaeda do not make their attacks on innocent civilians in the U.S. and abroad any less abhorrent. However, they do uphold the idea that al-Qaeda made killing innocent civilians a goal in and of itself. The excerpts show that the attacks are part of a bigger plan based on hierarchically ordered political, religious and strategic goals. Bin Laden stressing the importance of cost-benefit analyses in al-Qaeda’s attacks while leveraging the American cost-benefit analysis in an attempt to get them to pull out of the Muslim world underlies the idea that terrorist might be cold, but rational, killers. Most importantly for our purposes, this means that the terrorists’ goals can be held at risk in an attempt to deter them. The costs of terrorist attacks can be increased through retaliatory attacks by the U.S., attempts can be made to alienate al-Qaeda from the wider Muslim community, and benefits can be denied by building up resilience against attacks at home and abroad to the point that terrorists are convinced that there will be little to gain for them in any attack.

5.2 Return address and receiving threats

Even if the U.S. was to be convinced by the above indications of terrorist rationality, a final hurdle towards successfully deterring their terrorist adversary remains. Which is the twofold problem of the return address, because they would still both need to communicate the threat to them as well as carry it out in the case. The likelihood of success of the latter has been discussed at length in existing works on deterrence authors such as Job C. Henning and Wilner who argue that technological advances such as bomb- and surveillance drones have provided an answer to this problem (Henning, 2012; Wilner, 2010). This idea is also supported by the abovementioned documents concerning the fear that al-Qaeda operatives were experiencing, which was the result of the U.S. seemingly having little trouble in locating al-Qaeda members or strongholds and striking them from within or from afar with deadly precision. The former part of the return address problem, regarding the communication of threats, has received less attention in academic literature. Even deterrence’s proponents such as Wilner argued that “[c]ommunicating threats may prove difficult. As a result, al-Qaeda might not properly understand nor fully appreciate the consequences of its actions” (2015b). This could be the result of a failure to communicate the messages by the

U.S., misinterpretation of those messages on al-Qaeda's side, or even worse, wilful ignorance towards the communicated statements.

The latter is dispelled rather quickly with even a brief glance at the documents that were found in Bin Laden's compound. In total, 75 publicly available U.S. government documents are listed. Among the documents are the final 9/11 Commission report, Congressional research reports and on al-Qaeda, reports from the Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, State Department and Department of Justice on both the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and some speeches by government officials. And although it is widely believed that Bin Laden did not speak or read English himself, some of the letters authored by him show that he had access to translations of these and other documents and speeches. In several of them, Bin Laden refers to such things as "the new statement by the American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates", "the speech of President Obama announcing the withdrawal of American forces" (OBLB, n.d. -d) and "the speech, in which Bush made four broad claims" (OBLB, 2007a). As explained by Bin Laden himself in a letter, the reason for paying such close attention to the American government is because:

"one of the most important matters when there is a conflict between two sides: Each side needs to be informed about its enemy's culture, history, his way of thinking, his strengths, and his weakest points ... By following the development of the struggle between us and the statements made by the American politicians, as well as studying the reality of the war between us and examining [the Americans'] previous wars, it became clear to us that attacking the US from within is of extreme importance (OBLB, 2007a).

So more than merely receiving the messages by the American government, al-Qaeda were actively trying to understand the American modus operandi in order to adapt their own strategy. This is further evidenced by a letter addressed at Bin Laden by one of his subordinates urging him to "[p]lease dedicate some brothers to translate the documents on Afghanistan and Pakistan that were leaked from the Pentagon because these documents contain the strategy of the enemy in the area. The US Secretary of Defense stated that the leak of these documents will negatively affect the war" (OBLB, 2010d).¹ Based on the information available to them, al-Qaeda were able to discern a strategy which they called the "American war of maneuvers." This strategy "focuses on the

¹ The documents referred to are the documents that were part of the so-called "Afghan War Diary" disclosure of internal U.S. military logs published by WikiLeaks on July 25, 2010. The log consisted of more than 91.000 Afghan War documents.

desired target, and uses all available means to achieve it ... the Americans attempt to suffocate the enemy by besieging it from all sides, and attempting to destroy it, through psychological and mental warfare.” The main weapon against this was “to be able to read Americans' minds at the right time, and to know their intentions beforehand, so that they find us one step ahead of them” (OBLB, 2010b). Al-Qaeda were thus clearly paying close attention to what the Americans were saying and doing.

Most importantly for our purposes, the documents show that through studying the American strategy, al-Qaeda clearly understood that they were at the receiving end of threats and they were able to appreciate the consequences of its own actions. In a letter from 2007 by one of his advisers, Bin Laden was told that “the battle is historic as the damned Bush said, and the first thing sought for now is the head of al-Qaeda and its members” (OBLB, n.d. -g). Moreover, in a discussion with al-Zawahiri on how to deal with Iran, Bin Laden showed that he had a firm grasp on the basic tenets of deterrence. He scolded his right-hand man for threatening the Iranian government without actually carrying out those threats because “the passing of the grace period without carrying out your threats affects the believability of your words, and your threats will be meaningless. Threats are a tough test for your ability to deliver” (OBLB, 2007c). Bin Laden argues that instead of announcing the threats, al-Qaeda should “strike in silence, leaving indications or announce that you are responsible for the act, and to protect your reputation in case your plans were not successful” (2007c).

Ultimately, it would be too unreflective and naïve to chalk down a failure of deterrence to misinterpretation or wilful ignorance on the terrorists' part. Al-Qaeda might indeed be a decentralized organization operating in the shadows of society that is harder to directly communicate with than the Soviet Union. President Bush never had a summit meeting with Osama Bin Laden like President Nixon did with Leonid Brezhnev in 1972. Despite this, however, the U.S. government was aware of the fact that their threats were received by al-Qaeda. Over the course of the war, Bin Laden made multiple public statements, some of them broadcast globally by Al Jazeera, in which he directly responds to the American people. In his “Message for all Muslims following the U.S. State of the Union Address” (broadcast on Al Jazeera on October 29, 2004) he refutes claims made by the “lying Crusader-president Bush” in his SOTU address of that year regarding the situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The four claims addressed by al-Qaeda's

leader are taken from the president's speech nearly verbatim (OBLB, n.d. -f). In another message that was aired by Al-Jazeera on January 19, 2006 he even made the American people an offer for:

“a long-term truce on fair conditions that we adhere to ... so both sides can enjoy security and stability. If you are sincere in your desire for peace and security, we have answered you. And if Bush decides to carry on ... the nights and days will not pass without us taking vengeance like on September 11.” (NYT, 2006).

What the current chapter has shown is that there is little evidence in the OBLB documents to support the assumptions from the previous chapter about the terrorists' supposed lack of rationality and a return address. To be sure, some documents do speak in unfamiliar or religious terms, but overall, the documents show that al-Qaeda members and leaders were not eager to die, did have political goals, did understand that they were being threatened and were attentive to American messages. Accordingly, the existing arguments raised by skeptics of deterrence in both politics and academia are unable to properly account for the failure of deterrence against al-Qaeda. It seems that there is little evidence to suggest that there is something inherent to the characteristics of modern day terrorists that breaks down deterrence. Instead, as will be done in the next chapter, the gaze should be turned inward to see how rather than being a failure of deterrence, it was a failure to *apply* deterrence by the U.S.

6. The defeat-deter paradox

The words in the aforementioned offer for peace by Bin Laden get straight to the core of an understudied reason for why deterrence as a U.S. counterterrorism policy was unsuccessful, which this chapter seeks to address. It concerns the third condition for successful deterrence, which is that the deterrer needs to promise their adversary an alternative state of affairs if they are to refrain from the deterred behavior (i.e. the positive dimension to deterrence). In the case of al-Qaeda, this alternative was never offered by the American government and as a result, the U.S. failed in fully deterring their adversary. The reason for this is not that the doubts about terrorist rationality and their lack of a return address were real, as evidenced above. Instead, deterrence failed because the U.S. government *believed* their doubts to be real and acted on those doubts in important policy decisions. The result was an overreaching and overly aggressive military approach that took shape after 9/11. At the same time, the U.S. government refused to drop deterrence as a policy altogether, which led to them working towards achieving the two incompatible goals of defeating and deterring a single adversary.

6.1 *Lack of reassurance*

Indicative of the aggressive approach was the fact that the U.S. government always stressed that they would not stop until “every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (Bush, 2001a). Just nine days after the September 11 attacks, Bush made it clear that such threats and demands made by the U.S. are “not open to negotiation or discussion” (2001a). This stance was further formalized in the 2002 National Security Strategy and it became part of the so-called Bush Doctrine. The core of the doctrine held that, rather than waiting for a threat to materialize against the U.S., they would reserve the right to act pre-emptively and unilaterally against developing threats. The NSS stated that:

“Given the goals of rogue states and terrorists, the United States can no longer rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today’s threats ... do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first” (EOP, 2002).

This lack of belief in deterrence’s utility was a reflection of the lessons that administration officials had taken from the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil: the United States should not and could not let

adversaries strike before taking action themselves. With the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Bush swiftly proved its willingness to act on this new doctrine.

In the following years, the rhetoric of the total destruction of al-Qaeda permeated government documents and public appearances by both presidents. The U.S. continued to assure terrorists that ‘our priority is to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations and attack their leadership.’ Soon after, this threat was extended to not only the organization’s leaders, but also its foot soldiers. In his 2004 SOTU address, Bush warned his adversary that there are “thousands of very skilled and determined military personnel ... on the manhunt, going after the remaining killers who hide in cities and caves, and, one by one, we will bring these terrorists to justice.” The 2006 NSCT also made it an explicit goal to “to capture and kill foot soldiers ... which include the operatives, facilitators, and trainers in a terrorist network. They are the lifeblood of a terrorist group – they make it run” (EOP, 2006b). Even after the U.S. dealt its biggest blow yet to al-Qaeda, by taking out Bin Laden, the “symbol and operational leader of al-Qaeda,” president Obama warned that “every terrorist in the al Qaeda network should be watching their back, because ... we’re going to finish the job. We are going to defeat al Qaeda” (Obama, 2011b). Such uncompromising threats were rarely accompanied by any prospect of an alternative situation in which not every single terrorist would be hunted down and brought to justice. As a result, the leaders of al-Qaeda had little reason to back down. They were essentially told by the Americans that ‘if you take one more step, we’ll shoot you. And if you stay where you are, you will still be shot.’

What is striking about the aforementioned 2002 NSS and subsequent policy documents, however, is that even in their most thorough and broad criticism of deterrence in the modern age, they do not drop the concept altogether. The authoritative Quadrennial Defense Review of early 2006, for example, mentions the word “deter” (or its synonyms and variants) over sixty times (DoD, 2006a). Rather than arguing for the total obsolescence of deterrence, it holds that deterrence is “less likely to work” on terrorists and rogue states, rather than fully improbable. What was needed to reinvigorate deterrence was the bolstering of the image of America’s strength abroad. Donald Rumsfeld warned president Bush that the world’s eyes would be on him to see how he would tackle his first foreign policy crisis. Bush went on to respond that he was “ready to lean forward, to erase any impression of American softness” (Thomas, 2003). And so he did after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the aftermath, deliberating on a response, the President often indicated his

strong desire to send a message. This message was to be addressed at both the terrorists themselves as well as state sponsors of terrorism. Two days after 9/11, Bush told the NSC that: “we’re going to hurt the Taliban so bad that everyone in the world sees, don’t deal with Osama bin Laden” (As cited in Woodward, 2002, p. 36). In public, too, Bush repeatedly expressed this desire. Speaking to the military college of South Carolina in December 2001, Bush stated:

“Our military has a new and essential mission. For states that support terror, it’s not enough that the consequences be costly – they must be devastating. The more credible this reality, the more likely that regimes will change their behavior” (2001c).

The prevailing belief in the Bush administration was that such a posture of military toughness would help deter terrorists themselves as well. Or rather, as declared by the President’s second-term National Security Strategy: ‘terrorists are emboldened more by perceptions of weakness than by demonstrations of resolve. Terrorists lure recruits by telling them that we are decadent and easily intimidated and will retreat if attacked’ (EOP, 2006a). In short, even in its defense of deterrence, Bush argued for an aggressive posture and a willingness to act, which would discourage terrorists from attacking.

Under the Obama administration, the seemingly dichotomous attitude towards deterrence continued. In the 2010 National Security Strategy, doubts were expressed about deterrence’s effectiveness against terrorists, arguing that “we also recognize that we will not be able to deter or prevent every single threat. The United States is now threatened by the potential spread of nuclear weapons to extremists who may not be deterred from using them” (EOP, 2010, p. 17). Only two paragraphs below this statement, however, it argues that: “We maintain superior capabilities to deter and defeat adaptive enemies” and “we are strengthening our military to ensure that it can prevail in today’s wars; to prevent and deter threats against the United States, its interests, and our allies and partners ... and, if necessary, defeat a wide range of state and nonstate actors” (EOP, 2017, p. 14).

At the same time, it was president Obama who first offered some avenues for rapprochement in his inaugural address by turning to the Muslim world who he promised to ‘seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and respect’ (2009a). And more importantly, he told “those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench

your fist” (2009a). He conceded a few months later as well that “we can’t count on military might alone ... because we can’t capture or kill every violent extremist abroad” (2009c). Instead, the U.S. should focus on strengthening their homeland security, defeating al-Qaeda by “targeting their leaders” and ‘cutting off the head of al-Qaeda’s organization’ (2011a). The U.S. backtracked on its rigid stance even further when it received increasing criticism for its treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Obama reiterated that they are at war with al-Qaeda, but they must “deal with this threat ... with abiding confidence in the rule of law and due process” (2009b). As a result, he banned so-called enhanced interrogation techniques that “serve as a recruitment tool for terrorists, and increase the will of our enemies to fight us ... They risk the lives of our troops by making it less likely that others will surrender to them in battle. In short, they did not advance our war and counterterrorism efforts -- they undermined them” (2009b). In early 2009, Obama also signed an Executive Order for the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp altogether. The U.S. government thus came to realize that their unrelenting and uncompromising approach might have been counterproductive.

6.2 *The implications of the paradox*

The OBLB documents, however, show that this realization came too late. The few concessions made did not outweigh the dozens of threats of total annihilation addressed at al-Qaeda’s leadership over the years prior and after. As late as 2010, Bin Laden warned the U.S. that “the motives that led to 9/11 are still there, even increasing and escalating due to your crimes and stupidity” (OBLB, 2010e). These crimes consisted of “the oppressing and embargoing to death of millions ... and millions of bombs and explosives at millions of children”, and “they terrorize the women and children, and kill the men as they lie sleeping with their families on their mattresses” (OBLB, n.d. -f). The Americans have shown through their actions “who the real terrorists are” and that “the oppression and intentional killing of women and children, and anyone who resists their ideas, is a deliberate American policy” (OBLB, n.d. -i). As they frame it themselves, al-Qaeda sees itself as merely taking a defensive stance. In his address to the American people in 2004, Bin Laden asks out loud: “is defending oneself and punishing the aggressor in kind, objectionable terrorism? If it is such, then it is unavoidable for us” (Al Jazeera, 2004). They are “killing to stop the killing of our people”, and as a result, the “answer to this simple formula is in your hands. Stop killing us to save your own lives” (OBLB, n.d. -c). Al-Qaeda reiterated many times that they had

‘no objection to signing a long-term truce’ because as much as they are “determined and keen on shedding your blood and bleeding your economy,” in their religion there is “some allowance, and it is that we turn toward peace if the enemy turns toward it” (OBLB, n.d. -m).

What both president Bush and Obama failed to recognize or address in their public speeches and their administration’s policy documents, however, was that by not dropping the idea of deterrence altogether, they were now working towards achieving two wholly incompatible aims: the deterrence and total defeat of al-Qaeda. Because while government officials were convinced that pre-emptive attacks aimed at destroying an adversary might have deterrent knock-on effects on third parties, specific situations still require an either/or choice. Either the U.S. tries to deter al-Qaeda, meaning it does not attack pre-emptively, at least for the time being, or it opts to pre-empt, meaning it abandons the use of deterrence. All this is not to say that pre-emption is the wrong choice, only that the United States cannot have the cake and eat it too. The more that the U.S. prioritizes pre-emption against a specific actor, the more it risks undermining deterrence efforts against that same actor. Conversely, if the U.S. wants to strengthen its deterrence efforts, it will need to moderate its attempts to fully defeat that same adversary. The latter, however, implies that the deterrer is prepared to co-exist with their adversary, because it assumes that the adversary can be successfully deterred from attacking them (Crenshaw, 2001). The security of the deterrer state would no longer depend on the full elimination of their adversary.

One of the few documents that did address this defeat-deter paradox and warned for the tandem use of deterrence and offensive military strategies was the *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept* (or DO-JOC) by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2006. It argued that the “nature of US interests or war aims may at times be fundamentally inconsistent with encouraging adversary restraint by convincing them that inaction will result in an outcome acceptable to them, and the adversary’s perceived consequences of restraint will make deterrence success unlikely” (DoD, 2006b, p. 28). A forward-leaning posture might cause “adversary decision-makers [to] perceive that they will lose less by acting than by not acting.” This could result in making “escalation the adversary’s ‘least bad alternative’” (DoD, 2006b, p. 27). The only option to alleviate such concerns is to communicate to the adversary that ‘the U.S. forces could be doing more harm to him than is taking place, and that the current operations are not simply a precursor to broader operations with more ambitious objectives’ (DoD, 2006b, p. 28). It is crucial in this regard that such assurances are “clearly communicated to (and understood by) adversary decisionmakers” (DoD, 2006b, p.

28). The problem as mentioned above, however, was that the U.S. never clearly and credibly communicated its willingness to trade inaction for inaction or to co-exist with al-Qaeda. Even the few semblances of assurance offered by president Obama to al-Qaeda were troubled by its simultaneous efforts to fully extirpate al-Qaeda. Obama drastically ramped up the amount of drone attacks on al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan, risking many civilian casualties while alienating the Pakistani public. In December 2009 he also committed another thirty thousand forces to the fight, on top of the sixty-eight thousand already in place. Contrast such operations to the actions taken against non-state adversaries such as Hamas or Hezbollah and one can see how al-Qaeda accurately interpreted the American goals to be the full dismantlement of its organization.

Ultimately, then, the U.S. failed to deter al-Qaeda not because the latter party lacked a return address, strategic goals, the ability to make rational choices or a will to live, as has been suggested by previous works. It wasn't a failure of deterrence or the fact that the U.S. supposedly faced an undeterrable adversary. Rather, it was a failure to *apply* deterrence correctly. It was because the U.S. *believed* their doubts about terrorist rationality and communication to be real that they never fully committed to deterrence and tried to simultaneously work towards destroying their adversary. And rather ironically, it was exactly because al-Qaeda *did* have their strategic goals, were able to receive American statements, and were able to accurately interpret the costs of the threats directed at them that deterrence broke down. The reception of American threats led al-Qaeda to the inevitable conclusion that they were going to be destroyed regardless of their willingness to restrain from certain courses of action. Consequently, the terrorists judged that if they are to go down, then they might as well do so while putting up a fight. Or as worded by Osama Bin Laden in his aforementioned 2006 message to the American people: "As for us, we have nothing to lose. A swimmer in the ocean does not fear the rain" (NYT, 2006).

7. Conclusion

Since the death of Bin Laden, al-Qaeda has suffered great losses as a result of the sustained military campaigns by the U.S. The influx of new recruits has all but halted, and even after their retreat from Afghanistan, the U.S. still managed to deal important blows to the terrorists through such drone strikes as the one that killed Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on July 31, 2022. Despite the damage dealt to its foundations, however, al-Qaeda's core has remained operational both within Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as in Africa and South Asia. Moreover, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) in January, 2023 noted that "Al-Qaeda remains intent on striking U.S. interests and inspiring its followers ... to direct attacks against the United States from Afghanistan." Similarly, al-Qaeda's regional affiliates such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al-Shabab leave the NCTC "concerned about the continued threat that [they] pose to U.S. citizens and Western interests" (Abizaid, 2023). So, despite progress in some areas, it isn't too farfetched to argue that the U.S. never truly achieved their objective of fully defeating and deterring al-Qaeda. If anything, what remains of al-Qaeda might be emboldened by the U.S. retreat and the subsequent Afghan government takeover by the Taliban, who have harbored al-Qaeda and continue to maintain close ties. A UN Security Council report noted that al-Qaeda now "enjoys greater freedom and views the victory of the Taliban as a motivating factor" (UNSC, 2022, p. 16).

Although an integral analysis of the reasons for the U.S. failure to achieve a resounding victory against al-Qaeda was far beyond the scope of this thesis, it has sought to at least provide one piece of the puzzle by analyzing the reasons for deterrence's failure as a key part of the American counterterrorist strategy. Most importantly, it has moved the discussion away from *a priori* accepting that the U.S. successfully implemented deterrence as a part of their military strategy. Departing from such an assumption reduces deterrence to a process involving only one party, whereas in reality deterrence is a highly communicative process that involves at least two parties, requiring mutual understanding and communication. This thesis critically assessed deterrence theory's supposed aphorisms about the difficulties of deterring terrorists, and their impact on policy decisions, by reintroducing the deterrer into the equation. The primary conclusion is that deterrence didn't fail, but that the U.S. failed to implement a deterrent strategy, because it was unable to offer al-Qaeda any credible reassurances of restraint. This is not to say that the U.S.

was right or wrong to choose deterrence as a strategy in the first place, but rather to understand that the execution of the strategy was faulty.

And although the current focus was on the U.S. war against al-Qaeda specifically, it has some important broader policy implications. First, the prospects of deterring terrorists are much better than initially thought by both U.S. government officials and academics. Although it always remains a possibility that deterrence against any adversary will fail, there is little reason to believe that there is anything inherent to terrorist organizations that makes deterrence destined to fail. By misrepresenting terrorists as being irrational and out of reach, the U.S. would forgo an important that has been a part of their military arsenal for decades. If executed correctly, however, it could remain a key instrument and the U.S. could opt to lean into deterrence even more as a counterterrorist strategy. Second, to execute deterrence correctly, the U.S. would need to clearly choose between various strategies. If they want to opt for an offensive strategy aimed at defeating their adversary, then they are better off by not complicating their strategy through the use of deterrence. Conversely, the Bush and Obama administration were unable to get as much leverage from deterrence as was possible, because their emphasis on pre-emption and the defeat of al-Qaeda undermined their ability to credibly offer reassurances. The adversary that the U.S. sought to deter, came to fear that regardless of them obeying deterrent signals, they would still become the target of American attacks.

Concerning the latter observation about offering credible reassurances, future research would benefit from studying the challenges of having multiple audiences for the same strategic communication. One of the difficulties for the U.S. in successfully executing deterrence policies might have been that the communicated statements containing deterrent threats were communicated to both the domestic audience as well as the terrorists. Similarly, any reassurances given publicly to the terrorists would have also been received by domestic audiences. In the years after 9/11, the American public harbored strong feelings of revenge and retaliation for the attacks. Two months after the attacks, 78% of Americans agreed on committing troops to fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban for multiple years. Consequently, it would have been hard for U.S. government officials to publicly admit a willingness to co-exist with al-Qaeda and leave them undisturbed without upsetting the majority of the public (Gallup, 2022). Instead, the public wanted their government to crack down hard on their new adversary. This double bind in which government officials found themselves has to date received little academic scrutiny.

Another important avenue for further research is the impact that strengthening a state's defense against possible terrorist attacks can have on deterrence. Because while defense and deterrence are conceptually different, defensive measures can have a deterrent effect. By "hardening" targets and strengthening resilience, states could convince terrorists that their attacks are less likely to succeed and that, even in the case of a successful attack, a state will not change its ways and yield to the terrorists. So, where deterrence by punishment aims to coerce the enemy through fear, states would instead look to deny the enemy its perceived benefits and to cause hopelessness. Such a defensive approach to deterrence at home could prove to be more compatible with a strategy aimed at the defeat of the enemy abroad.

In the current security environment, the Biden administration has put deterrence on the backburner in the fight against terrorists. Strategy and security documents still refer to it, but only in the context of nuclear deterrence being a top priority for national security. Terrorism is only to be 'disrupted and degraded' and not deterred and defeated (EOP, 2022, p. 31 & 44). Despite a reduced emphasis, however, deterrence could still be a key part of deterring terrorism, especially if we accept that the prospects of doing so are better than previously thought. With the Taliban becoming a state actor, while providing a safe haven to al-Qaeda, we might also see a rekindling of interest in deterrence theory now that concerns about deterrence's impotence against non-state terrorist actors should become less relevant. Unfortunately, no guarantees can be made about deterrence being the most effective policy in a specific situation. However, if a government is willing to fully commit to the doctrine, it will greatly increase the odds of its success.

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