



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

TESTIMONIES

Special Operations Forces: Challenges and Opportunities

March 3, 2009 | **Robert Martinage**

Resources: Forces & Capabilities

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share my views on the challenges and opportunities facing U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).¹

SOF have figured prominently in U.S. military operations since 2001 and have become central to the implementation of U.S. national defense strategy with respect to the war against violent Islamist extremism, which is likely to be increasingly fought indirectly and in countries with which the United States is not at war. During the unconventional war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom, SOF played a pivotal role by integrating U.S. precision air power with the operations of irregular Afghan opposition forces to achieve rapid regime change and eliminate al Qaeda's primary sanctuary. Since the fall of the Taliban, SOF have played a critical role in training and advising elements of the Afghan National Army, providing personal security for senior Afghan officials, and capturing or killing scores of senior Taliban and al Qaeda leaders and lower-level operatives. They are now also actively engaged along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and training elements of Pakistan's Frontier Corps and Special Service Group. In the early phases of the war with Iraq, SOF again played a central role in a special operations-intensive campaign, providing the primary ground force element on two of three fronts, and performing a number of special reconnaissance, direct-action, and unconventional warfare missions in support of the conventional campaign. Over the past six years, they have been instrumental in training and advising Iraqi security forces, as well as in hunting down high-value al-Qaeda targets in Iraq. In the broader war against violent Islamist radicalism, to the extent their constrained capacity allows, SOF are building partner capacity, collecting intelligence, conducting counterterrorism operations and hunting high-value targets in multiple countries across several continents. In the Philippines, for example, SOF have led an indirect approach to counterinsurgency with great success. They have also sustained their key role in U.S. counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations in Colombia and the Andean Ridge. The operations tempo currently being sustained by SOF is the highest in its history.

SOF face several challenges, as well as opportunities, in adapting to a future security environment that will likely be dominated by the continuation and possible intensification of violent Islamic radicalism, the potential rise of the People's Republic of China as a more aggressive political-military competitor of the United States, and the global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), in particular nuclear weapons.²

Defeating Violent Islamist Radicalism

There are two branches of violent Islamist radicalism today: heterodox Salafi-Takfiri groups within the Sunni Muslim community and “Khomeinist” Shiite groups that both strive to impose their brand of sharia justice on the entire world.³ Al Qaeda is an example of the former, while Iranian-backed Hezbollah is an archetype of the latter. Terrorist cells are active in more than 60 countries around the world. Moreover, there are radical Islamist insurgencies of varying stages underway in nearly a score of countries— most notably in Pakistan, Afghanistan, countries in the Maghreb and Horn of Africa, and Lebanon. The operating environment spans from Europe to the most underdeveloped parts of the world, and ranges from densely populated urban areas and mega-cities to remote mountains, deserts and jungles. For the United States, it encompasses permissive, semi-permissive, and non-permissive environments, as well as hostile or denied areas. The ability of U.S. allies and partners to address the threat ranges from sophisticated to almost non-existent, but even in the most capable partner areas (i.e., Europe), Islamist terrorist cells have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to operate.

To prevail in this war, the United States, along with its allies and partners, will need to conduct a sustained, multifaceted, global “smother campaign” to deny terrorists sanctuary whether in under-governed areas or state-controlled territory, sever the transnational links upon which they rely, impede recruitment and fundraising, track them down wherever they may be hiding and plotting, and disrupt their operations. The United States cannot successfully wage this campaign alone. It will be essential to build the security capabilities and capacities of as many partners—both nations and disaffected non-state actors—as possible. It will be necessary to put additional pressure on state sponsors of terrorism. The U.S. Government will also need to shore up weak or failing states to prevent them from becoming terrorist sanctuaries. Finally, for long-term success, it is imperative for the U.S. Government to engage more aggressively in the “war of ideas” to isolate the Salafi-Takfiri and Khomeinist extremists from the mainline Muslim community, divide these violent movements internally, and undermine their ideological appeal. In short, defeating violent Islamic extremism will require a multifaceted approach—one in which the military instrument will often be far less important than effective foreign assistance, public and private diplomacy, strategic communications, and covert action. That being said, SOF will need to be shaped, sized, and postured to:

- Conduct proactive, sustained “manhunting” and disruption operations globally;
- Build partner capacity in relevant ground, air, and maritime capabilities in scores of countries on a steady-state basis;
- Help generate persistent air and maritime surveillance and strike coverage over “under-governed” areas and relevant littoral zones; and
- Employ unconventional warfare against state sponsors of terrorism and transnational terrorist groups globally.

¹ This statement is drawn from Robert Martinage, *Special Operations Forces—Future Challenges and Opportunity* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2008).

² In addition to the potential threat posed by China, the U.S. military must also be prepared to confront the prospective rise of authoritarian capitalist states such as Russia. It is assumed here, however, that the latter challenge is in large part a lesser included case of the former. Similarly, it is assumed that a force postured to deal with these three challenges would be more than adequate for addressing the threat posed by regional powers. Andrew Krepinevich, Robert Martinage, and Bob Work, *The Challenges to US National Security* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2008).

³ For an expanded discussion, see Robert Martinage, *The Global War on Terrorism: An Assessment* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2007).

Conducting Manhunting and Disruption Operations Globally

In close cooperation with the other government agencies (primarily the CIA), SOF can help locate, track, and capture or kill terrorists and their leaders in hostile, state-controlled territory (e.g., Iran and Syria), under-governed areas (e.g., the tribal areas of Pakistan), and densely populated cities from Beirut to Mindanao. They can also be relied upon to interdict the movement of critical supplies and destroy terrorist infrastructure (e.g., training camps, communications, and weapon/supply caches). These operational tasks have two major implications for SOF posture. First and foremost, SOF will need to build and maintain a persistent, low-visibility ground presence in several known or suspected terrorist operating areas around the world, as well as in expansive, under-governed areas that are vulnerable to terrorist exploitation (e.g., the Trans-Sahara region of Africa, the Sulu/Sulawesi Seas littoral, and large swaths of Central Asia). Second, SOF will need to be prepared to conduct clandestine operations (most likely unconventional warfare) and support CIA-led covert activities against state sponsors of terrorism, including those armed with significant anti-access capabilities. An on-the-ground presence is essential not only for collecting tactical intelligence and developing local situational awareness, but also for supporting partner security forces and responding rapidly (either unilaterally or in a combined operation) if and when high-value terrorist targets are identified and located. Currently, however, over 80 percent of SOF capacity is allocated to just two countries: Iraq and Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has indicated that the SOF commitment to those countries will probably not decline significantly over the next several years, even as conventional forces withdraw from Iraq. As he remarked in May 2008:

The eventual drawdown in Iraq is not the end of the mission for our elite forces. Far from it. Even as our regular troops reduce their presence and are replaced by Iraqis, special operations force levels will remain fairly constant and be the connective tissue for the overall mission. They will be in Iraq and Afghanistan for an extended period of time—a force to hunt and kill terrorists, and also as a force to help train Iraqis and Afghans.

The opportunity cost of that commitment, however, has been a significant reduction in SOF presence in other countries, including several terrorist “hot spots” in Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Admiral Eric Olson, commander of the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), summarized the unfortunate situation: “we’re going to fewer countries, staying for shorter periods of time, with smaller numbers of people than historically we have done.”⁵ This limited, episodic SOF presence outside of Iraq and Afghanistan is unacceptable strategically. Additional SOF capacity is needed, possibly beyond that called for in the 2006 QDR, to sustain a persistent, low-visibility ground presence in scores of areas outside of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Building Partner Capacity

Given finite U.S. counterterrorism capacity, the impracticability of conducting American military (or even covert) operations in several relevant places around the world, and the political/diplomatic need to avoid the perception of a unilateral American war against Islam, it is essential to train, equip, and advise foreign security forces— including air and maritime forces, as well as ground forces—in as many countries as possible. If the United States is successful in this regard, more and more partner states will, in time, become fully capable of suppressing or eliminating terrorist threats within their own territory. Not only will this create the conditions for a gradual reduction in the U.S. military’s commitment abroad, it could also facilitate more effective counterterrorism operations since these partners have unmatched advantages with respect to cultural intimacy and language proficiency.

Because of their foreign language skills, cultural expertise, and familiarity with a wide range of commonly used foreign weapons, the U.S. Army's Special Forces (SF) are the country's premier force for training, advising, and equipping foreign security forces. In addition, Marine Special Operations Command's (MARSOC) Marine Special Operations Advisor Group teams are developing specialized foreign internal defense-related skill sets and expertise. Elements of this mission, however, could and should be performed by general purpose forces, freeing up SOF for missions that exploit their "special" capabilities. With modest training and basic language instruction, for example, conventional Army and Marine Corps units could train and advise conventional military forces in basic counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures in partner states that are willing to accept what is likely to be a relatively large American "footprint" on their territory. In countries where the disclosure of U.S. military presence would be politically risky for the host nation, however, SOF will likely be relied upon for the foreign internal defense (FID) mission. Unfortunately, given falling favorable public views of the United States over the past several years, more and more states want to keep their involvement with the U.S. military as discreet as possible. Moreover, SOF will also be required for training and advising foreign special operations forces. In short, while the general purpose force may reduce the foreign internal defense workload for SOF at the margins, one should harbor no illusions that it will be possible (or desirable) for SOF to divest the bulk of the foreign internal defense mission; it will unquestionably remain a major operational focus for SOF in the years ahead.

As with creating a low-visibility network for global manhunting and disruption operations, the primary challenge associated with the closely linked requirement of building and leveraging partner capacity is a lack of available SOF force structure. While SOF conducted hundreds of FID missions in some fifty-six countries in 2007, they generally lasted only a few weeks and involved a relatively small number of personnel.⁶ With more than 80 percent of forward-deployed SOF tied down in Iraq and Afghanistan—and 99 percent of those forces committed to combat operations, Theater Security Cooperation Plan missions worldwide have fallen by about 50 percent.⁷ This major commitment to Central Command (CENTCOM) has not only dramatically reduced SOF's ability to support important activities in other areas, it has also had a detrimental effect on training for tasks that are not required for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (e.g., military free fall and underwater combat operations), as well as on foreign language proficiency in languages spoken outside the CENTCOM area of responsibility.

Developing and maintaining a network for combating terrorism globally will likely require the capacity to conduct training and advisory activities on a steady-state basis in at least a score of high-priority countries and carry out more episodic training activities on a rotational basis in another twenty to forty countries. Meeting this challenge will require changes in the capabilities, capacities and postures of both SOF—especially within SF battalions and the Marine Special Operations Advisor Group—and ground general purpose forces.⁸ As will be discussed below, the imperative to ramp up SOF-led training and advisory efforts globally will not only require additional personnel, but also the realignment of existing capacity to focus more attention on the Muslim world. More proficiency will be needed in languages spoken in critical “front line” areas, most notably Arabic, Pashto, Farsi, Dari, Punjabi, Balochi, Bahasa, and Filipino. In addition, the train, advise, and equip mission must be embraced as a core general purpose forces mission not only by the Army and Marine Corps, but also by the Air Force and Navy.

To continue reading, please download the PDF.

⁴ Robert M. Gates, Secretary of Defense, Speech delivered at Special Operations Forces International Conference, Tampa, Florida, May 21, 2008.

⁵ AP, "SOCOM Says Forces Spread Thin," May 6, 2006.

⁶ Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, USSOCOM, "Posture of Special Operations Forces," Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 4, 2008, p 7; and ARSOF Presentation, "Named Operations, TSCP Events, and Embassy Support 01 Oct-29 Jul 08," July 29, 2008.

⁷ ARSOF Presentation, "Named Operations, TSCP Events, and Embassy Support 01 Oct-29 Jul 08," July 29, 2008; GAO, Special Operations Forces—Several Human Capital Challenges Must Be Addressed to Meet Expanded Role (Washington, DC: GAO, 2006), pp. 29-35; and USSOCOM, United States Special Operations Command History, 1987-2007, p. 9.