Part II

For the record Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Russell Howard, founding director of the Jebsen Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies at Tufts University


Howard on counter-terrorism: “We are playing chess, and our adversary is playing poker. Chess has a finite number of moves and you can only move in certain directions, but poker has an exponential number of moves... because you can bluff.”

Dealing with forces beyond our control

U.S. influence alone may not alter Pakistan’s, al-Qaida’s fates

Part two or a two-part interview.

INTERVIEW. For all its efforts in combatting terrorism, there are some elements of extremism that the United States and its allies are unable to combat without help.

When we last left Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Russell Howard, the founding director of Tufts University's Jebsen Center for Counter-Terrorism cited support of populations in failing states as a means of staving off terror.

However, with portions of a politically volatile Pakistan becoming more unstable and welcome to militants, and al-Qaida becoming more amoebic as a global organization, Howard says some of the keys to preventing terrorism may lie beyond the sphere of U.S. influence.

Yesterday, you mentioned Bangladesh as a failing state that may draw interest from al-Qaida. Does having an unstable neighbor such as Pakistan hurt the cause of such countries?
I think so. There's all of this concern over Iran, but right now, for me, Pakistan is the place of most concern.

With Pakistan in danger of becoming a safe haven for extremists, what is Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf's role in the future of global terror?
Not all of Pakistan has been welcoming for militants, just the uncontrolled areas which have failed or have all the tenets of a failing state. In the more secular parts of Afghanistan, the population is after Musharraf to do something about extremists. When he's gone after the extremists, his base support has reacted favorably to it, but I defy anybody who his base support is or what his real numbers are. Pakistan is tough, and it's tough for the United States to know exactly what to do here. You've got to be real careful. I don't envy the Bush administration in this predicament.

Are the primary concerns about Pakistan necessarily related to terror anymore?
It's about nuclear weapons at this point. You can't let nuclear weapons get into the wrong hands. I don't know how you make it clear and I wish I had the answer here. I don't. I've watched many of the Democratic presidential contenders talk about Pakistan, and I think what they would like to say is "Withdraw support for Musharraf," but they can't. We're really in a tough spot here. If your administration's policy has been to advance democracy around the world and you have a quasi-democratic state that's now under martial law, what policy moves do you have?

Should neighboring states and other nations play a larger role in helping Pakistan?
I guess the one thing that U.S. influence has had a role in is Musharraf saying elections are paramount and that he'll step down from his military role. These moves are positive but, to me, it's just kind of delaying time. One of the key features of what's going on in Pakistan may be that there is no enthusiasm anywhere for nuclear weapons to get into the wrong hands. China, Russia, Iran, you name it — no one wants that to happen. There could be somewhat of a common denominator of international cooperation because of the

catastrophic consequences of what could happen.

Would nuclear conventions and the United Nations' nuclear watchdog efforts help in this case?

I am an advocate of not just nuclear proliferation regimes, but of chemical and biological weapon conventions, because it's important for states to understand the gravity of all of these so-called weapons of mass destruction getting into the wrong hands. The more international cooperation you have, the better, but the problem with all of the protocols is that they're for states, and bin Laden will never be a signatory to any of these conventions. Transnational, non-state actors are not signatories to them, nor would they adhere to them. It's got to be more than those protocols. As long as there's a state structure and you can pick up the phone and call a president, a prime minister, a king or a dictator and work with them to control nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, that's good. Absent some type of central structure in a state that has loose nukes: That's just a recipe for disaster.

With organizations such as the Irish Republican Army or the Palestine Liberation Organization, there were always figures to open dialogue with? Considering the threat posed by al-Qaida in a worst-case nuclear scenario in Pakistan, is it time to talk to — but not negotiate with — al-Qaida?

There are some differences with the IRA, PLO and al-Qaida. The IRA and PLO were substate actors and it was very clear what their objective was. It was very localized. Al-Qaida is not a substate actor, but a transnational substate actor with global reach and global aspirations. There are three things wrong with your hypothesis and one that's correct. First off, who are you going to talk to? The time to talk with bin Laden was after the first tower incident in New York City when it was pretty clear — though nobody listened — what the intent was. That was the time to sit down and talk, and that has nothing to do with negotiations. That's what people get all spun up about. My class here is all over me because I have said that talking is not negotiating. That would have been a time to sit down with bin Laden and ask what his problem was. He would have told us what it was, and then we would have asked what his intentions were and, if it was to attack the United States again, what he thought the result of that attack would be. He would have likely told us — based on two data points: The bombings in Beirut when the Marines were killed and the incident in Somalia — that Americans would leave the Middle East and that the rest of the Muslim world would rise up after an attack on the United States. However, there's no conflict in Pearl Harbor in his database. Attacking the United States is very different than Americans leaving what are usually unpopular peacekeeping operations anyway. A dialogue, or at least removing some missed perceptions back then, would have been important. Now would you talk with bin Laden? No, but in those days, there was more of a central command structure in al-Qaida than there is today.

What's No. 2?

It's a very cellular network system with many leaders, so who are you going to talk to? It's not clear to many that bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are in charge any more. Even if you could find someone to talk to, what would you negotiate? What in their

behavior would they be willing to change? If they want the U.S. and the West out of the Middle East, there's no room for negotiation there. If they want to resurrect the Caliphate, there's no room for negotiation there. The third thing they want is for Israel to away as a state, so there's no room there. The fourth thing is that they want you to convert, and I'm guessing there's not room there. So if you did talk what would you talk about?

And No. 3?
The third thing is that, if you do talk to them, do you give them the importance that they're looking for. Do you make them more important than they are? That's a common complaint, and I'm not sure I agree with it. It's the complaint the Bush administration uses with Iran, but dialogue is not negotiation. Dialogue can be very pointed and very short, but if you're not talking with people, you may not have the story. However, I do agree with people who say we shouldn't negotiate with al-Qaida, because there's nothing to negotiate.

Don't two major U.S. military operations ascribe al-Qaida figures the importance you're looking to avoid?
It's not a bad question. Putting so much importance on bin Laden and al-Zawahiri made them more importance than they are, and basing part of our policy on killing or capturing them gave them more stature than they deserve. Because, when you don't kill or capture them, what does that say about your policy or operation? You can think of many terms and none of them are very good. Afghanistan and Iraq are two very different military operations, and I wouldn't include Iraq in this equation, but it does make quite a statement when you execute an action such as the one in Afghanistan. I can tell you this for a fact: If we captured or killed them today, it's my perception that it wouldn't change al-Qaida's goals and objectives.

So how do you understand and deal with a network such as al-Qaida's?
I'd suggest that everyone read the book "The Starfish and the Spider." It's about networks. If you want to learn how al-Qaida, craigslist or Wikipedia works — without real central control or hierarchical bureaucratic administrations — give it a look. To defeat a network, you have to do one of two things: Become a network yourself. When you think about that, ask whether our 16 intelligence agencies and other bureaus in charge of national security are well networked or are they functioning as the same organizations they were before the Cold War. Or, you have to get the network you're fighting to get more hierarchical and bureaucratic so you can fight them on the same level. Al-Qaida in Iraq, at the beginning, was much that way. We are playing chess, and our adversary is playing poker. Chess has a finite number of moves and you can only move in certain directions, but poker has an exponential number of moves... because you can bluff.