

al Queda

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Within a two week period in May of 2003, major terrorist attacks occurred in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Morocco. In the Saudi attack eight Americans were killed. And as in the case of earlier attacks—U.S. embassies in Africa, the *USS Cole* in Yemen, a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, and American religious groups in the Philippines and Pakistan—the attacks were attributed to al Queda or organizations linked to or sympathetic with al Queda's agenda against American and Western interests. Whether accurate or not, al Queda has become a generic term for terrorism and terrorist acts in the Mid East, the Persian Gulf and much of the Muslim world. However, linking al Queda to just about every terrorist act that occurs worldwide has a downside.

First, such linkage is a public relations coup for the al Queda network in many Muslim countries. Such publicity can be expected to translate into more, not fewer followers. It is also likely that terrorist groups with none or only weak links to al Queda will be attracted to an organization perceived as monolithic. Thus, does logic suggest that a case can be made for downplaying al Queda's role in terrorism, not advertising it.

Second, governments that are unwilling to identify and come down hard on terrorism within their borders have a fall back position. They can argue that al Queda is too powerful, too monolithic and too popular with the man in the street. In their view a sustained crackdown would threaten government stability if not its very existence. And with respect to governments willing to challenge al Queda, there most likely would be an expected quid pro quo from the world's acknowledged leader in the fight against international terrorism and the world's only remaining military and economic superpower. Such a quid pro quo would probably take the form of trade concessions, political support and/or military and economic aid.

During campaign Iraq Freedom, President George W. Bush played the al Queda card. When political opponents suggested that he was neglecting the war on terrorism and concentrating the nation's military, intelligence, and economic resources into overthrowing Saddam Hussein, his response was that the Iraq

regime offered shelter and support to al Queda. It was a tenuous assertion, with some merit, but still grossly overstated. The purpose was to link the war against terrorism and the war against Iraq and argue that they were one and the same.

However, linking terrorism to every threat to American interests worldwide is not without a price. In this regard, what happens when a major threat to American security occurs *that cannot be linked to terrorism*? For example, a North Korea invasion of the South or the North selling weapons of mass destruction to nations unfriendly to the United States? Or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan? Or an attempt to overthrow the government of an important American ally? Could a president then give priority to a non terrorist threat without being accused of abandoning the war on terrorism? Would he hesitate when hesitation might portend disaster?

Argued here is that al Queda is not responsible for every terrorist attack everywhere. In this respect, there is little if any evidence that al Queda is connected with terrorist activities in northern Spain; with past and possible future IRA attacks in Northern Ireland; with terrorist acts in Chechnya, or with drug related attacks against Americans and American interests in Columbia.

Is not a covert policy of dividing terrorist groups better than an unintended policy of uniting them under a single umbrella. Is not there a role for the CIA in such a policy? Unfortunately, “al Queda” and “terrorism” have become interchangeable terms in much of the media. All too often those responsible for reporting the news will imply a connection between whatever terrorist act occurs on a particular day and al Queda. Is it not time for the media and politicians to be more discerning in their analyses, phrases and choice of words?