

# The Illogic of the War in Afghanistan

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July 16, 2010

The top story in the magazine section of Sunday's *New York Times* this week was on the possibility of Yemen becoming a potential hub for terrorist activity. The article was called "[Is Yemen the Next Afghanistan?](#)" and explored the possibility that Al Qaeda will begin using Yemen as its base. Interestingly, *Time* magazine explored the same question in an article with the [same title](#) last October.

Whether or not the article is right or wrong about Yemen is of secondary import. The more important issue is that there almost certainly will be another Afghanistan somewhere in the world. There are too many failing states with an Islamist presence, in which Al Qaeda could operate, for this not to be the case. This reality demonstrates the poor logic of the continued U.S. effort in Afghanistan. For the most part opposition to the war in Afghanistan has argued that the U.S. cannot achieve its goals there or that the cost of achieving those goals is too high. The *New York Times* article raises a different, but probably more important point—even on the off-chance that U.S. goals are achieved in Afghanistan, it won't really matter because the terrorists will move somewhere else, most likely Yemen.

If this premise is accepted, and it is not a particularly controversial premise, than it follows that the U.S. must pursue an Afghanistan like policy in Yemen and wherever the terrorists go after that. This is, of course, neither realistic nor wise, but it makes little sense to pursue a war in one country without being willing to take the battle somewhere else once the terrorists move there. This is not unlike the argument about police strategy for combating drugs which says if you put a lot of police on 8th street, drug dealers will simply move to 9th street, so flooding one neighborhood with police will only move the problem somewhere else. In the policing example, this led policy makers to explore other broader approaches to fighting crime and drug dealers. A similar understanding of fighting Jihadist terrorism is needed as well.

The need to carve out a different policy which reflects this reality arises not because the threat of Jihadist terror has been overstated, but because it is so real. Jihadist terror is global in nature and able to temporarily seek refuge in countries or regions, so making one country or region at a time inhospitable to terrorism, just like making one neighborhood or street at a time inhospitable to drug dealers, is the policy version of the old carnival game [Whac-A-Mole](#).

Comparisons of [Islamist terrorism to Soviet Communism or Nazi Germany](#), which have always been wrong for a number of reasons, are particularly misleading in this regard. The threat Al Qaeda and other terrorists organizations represent is significant, but unlike the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, Islamist terrorism is non-state threat, so it cannot be defeated simply by military defeat, as in Germany, or economic and political

collapse, as in the Soviet Union. This is why the effort in Afghanistan has been as much about building state institutions as it has been about military action. However, because of the global nature of Jihadist terror, Al Quada and other organizations are much more able to move somewhere else when things get difficult in one country. The Nazi and Communist leadership did not have this option.

Characterizing the U.S. anti-terrorism strategy as simply the war in Afghanistan is not accurate as the U.S. has a military presence throughout much of the world, gathers intelligence on terrorist activity everywhere and seeks to protect the homeland through a broad range of measures. Nonetheless, the war in Afghanistan has become the political, symbolic and financial centerpiece of this effort and is often presented by policy makers as the key component of the battle against Jihadist terror. The problem with this approach is not just that the war in Afghanistan is costly and perhaps unwinnable, but it is also inefficient and perhaps illogical. Achieving U.S. goals there will be difficult, but perhaps even Pyrrhic as well. Victory there may only mean that the threat has moved elsewhere.