

Arab Anti-Terror Efforts:

Assessing an Arab League Initiative

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Brief Analysis

Culminating five years of formal discussions designed to find an effective way to combat terrorism, the Council of Arab Interior Ministers (CAIM) decided January 5 to adopt an all-Arab antiterrorism accord, pending approval of the Arab justice ministers next April. Coming in the wake of recent massacres in Algeria and Egypt, which serve as a reminder that an estimated 65,000 and 1,150 people respectively, have been killed by terrorists in these countries since 1992, this anti-terrorism agreement merits careful scrutiny. On the positive side, this accord marks the first time that all Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority have agreed on basic principles to combat terrorism. Although several of the Arab governments involved in drafting the document-Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria-are themselves supporters of various terrorist groups (according to the U.S. government), there may be some utility in having these countries participate in an all-Arab effort that formally commits them to an official agreement.

Background: Concerned by the rise of Islamic extremist violence in the wake of the Gulf War, Arab interior ministers in 1992 began discussing formalized anti-terrorism cooperation. Although the CAIM and its experts' committees have met dozens of times and reportedly examined nearly 140 different recommendations for combating terrorism since 1992, it was not until January 1996 that the Interior Ministers took their first formal action by adopting a "code of ethics wherein Arab countries commit themselves to combat terrorism and abstain from participating or engaging in terrorist actions or offering asylum to the perpetrators of such acts." Moreover, it was not until August 1996 that the group reportedly agreed to a definition of terrorism. Although various reports describe the definition as including Islamic extremist violence and activities carried out by secular groups using violence to oppose various Arab governments, the only part of the definition that has been made public is the exception clause, excluding from the Arab definition of terrorism "armed struggles by peoples under foreign occupation to free their lands and realize their rights of self-determination"-i.e., codewords for the use of violence against Israel.

Since then, there have been several steps taken to translate this common understanding on terrorism-limited though it may be-into operational cooperation. In January 1997, Arab interior ministers approved a "joint strategy" to combat terrorism and committed themselves to increase intelligence sharing, tighten border controls and restrict fund-raising that could be channeled to terrorist groups. In the past year, resolutions of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Damascus Declaration group and the Organization of the Islamic Conference have similarly condemned terrorism, except for that perpetrated by the "liberation" groups. There also has been some increased anti-terrorism cooperation among Arab states most affected by terrorist activity, such as Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Jordan. Last week's draft anti-terrorism accord is meant to codify the "joint strategy" into law, though it will not be binding on any Arab state and will lack any enforcement mechanism.

The Draft Accord: Although the actual text of the draft anti-terrorism accord has not been released and will not be approved until April's Arab Justice Ministers meeting in Cairo, various press reports and other sources provide a basic framework of the accord. Except for Somalia and Djibouti, the interior ministers from all Arab countries-including Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria-and the Palestinian Authority (represented by Freih Abu Middain, the former

PA Justice Minister who was forced from his post after condoning the death penalty against Palestinians who sold land to Jews) agreed to a framework that includes: increasing judicial, security and intelligence cooperation; strengthening controls to prevent cross-border infiltrations and to heighten scrutiny of suspected terrorists at ports of entry; facilitating the extradition of individuals charged with and convicted of terrorist crimes; denying shelter to terrorists or terrorist groups; setting up a data bank within the Arab Penal Police Bureau; "elaborating an Arab information strategy to foster the Arab public opinion's awareness to the dangers of terror"; exchanging "media expertise" and information between Arab governments about terrorists; and adopting measures to curb the media activities of terrorist organizations.

According to Arab press reports, the accord focused on the use of Western countries by exiled Islamic extremists for fund-raising, recruitment, propaganda and weapons procurement as a primary threat to "Arab security" and called on Arab states to press Western governments to "stop their territory from being used to launch terror attacks against Arab states." Of course, the need to prevent terrorists from exploiting the free access of the West is real and pressing, but some in the region viewed this heavy emphasis on Western support for anti-Arab terrorists as a red herring. As the pan-Arab newspaper, Al Quds Al Arabi, noted, "there are no terrorist training camps in Britain as there are in so many Arab countries."

Authorizing Some Terrorist Activity: One of the most disturbing and deleterious aspects of the CAIM accord is that it actually lends legal authorization to activity that, under U.S. law, would be considered terrorism. This includes violent actions taken in the context of the "peoples' right to fight foreign occupation and aggression by all means in order to obtain their right to self-determination and independence." This actually expands on the exception agreed upon in the CAIM's 1997 "joint anti-terror strategy" that only allowed for "all means" to be used under the guise of "armed struggle by peoples under foreign occupation." The phrase "all means" makes no exclusion to prohibit targeting civilians, a crucial omission. Now, the exception appears to also authorize the supporters of those under "foreign occupation" or subject to "foreign aggression" to engage in violence, irrespective of whether the targets are civilians. In Arab political parlance, use of this terminology is usually understood to legitimize such behavior as Syrian support of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, it is less clear what kind of activity against "foreign aggression" would be condoned. For example, Iraq's Minister of Interior Mohammed Zimam Abd al-Razzaq reportedly told his Arab colleagues that, in his view, U.S. efforts to implement Security Council resolutions constitute "aggression" against which "confrontation" is legitimate. Even without adopting the Iraqi line, approving the text of the CAIM anti-terror accord means that all Arab states now have agreed to give a special legal sanction to attacks on civilians-which can only be called terrorism.

No Criticism of State Sponsors of Terrorism: Although, theoretically, the participation of the four Arab countries on the State Department's list of state-sponsors of terrorism-raq, Libya, Sudan and Syria-in drafting and agreeing to this document may be of some utility, their presence actually has been counter-productive. These states were able to use the anti-terrorism accord for their own purposes, namely to have the CAIM legally codify an authorization for terrorist activity carried out in the name of fighting "foreign occupation and aggression." In addition, these countries ensured that the CAIM did not criticize their use and support of terrorist organizations. Indeed, there is no evidence that CAIM deliberations included any criticism-veiled or otherwise-of the ongoing support for terrorism provided by the four Arab states on the State Department's list of state-sponsors.

Conclusions: Throughout the 1990s, Arab countries from the Mediterranean to the Gulf have found themselves increasingly the target of terrorism. Two years ago, about half the Arab League members participated in the Sharm el-Sheikh "summit of the peacemakers" and endorsed a tough anti-terror communique that criticized "all acts of terror"-including terrorism against Israel and Israelis. Although the Arab accord approved last week is important for its all-Arab commitment to increase security cooperation and restrict fund-raising for terrorists, it marks a step

backwards in the regional campaign against terrorism. By lending legal validity to some forms of terrorism and remaining silent on the role of state-sponsoring of terrorism within the Arab world itself, the accord sends the wrong message and marks an important opportunity lost.

Hillary Mann is a research fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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