

The Islamist Extremist Threat in -- and from -- Europe

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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In-Depth Reports

On September 24, 2005, Matthew Levitt, Robert Leiken, and Jacques Pitteloud addressed The Washington Institute's Weinberg Founders Conference. Dr. Levitt is director of the Institute's Terrorism Studies Program and author of the forthcoming book *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror under the Cover of Charity*. Dr. Leiken is director of the Immigration and National Security Program at the Nixon Center and author of *Bearers of Global Jihad? Immigration and National Security after 9/11* (2004). Mr. Pitteloud is coordinator of intelligence for the Swiss government. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Matthew Levitt

Two disturbing trends have emerged within international terrorism in the years since the September 11 attacks and the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada. First, logistical and financial support networks for terrorists have been established on a transnational basis, outside of countries that serve as militant bases of operations. Second, and even more troubling, transnational terrorists now commit acts of violence to promote causes that are not directly related to their countries of origin. Prominent cases include the active role of foreign terrorists in the Afghan war, the Iraqi insurgency, and, increasingly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, on April 30, 2003, a suicide bombing at a bar in Tel Aviv was carried out by two British nationals of Pakistani descent who had no obvious connection to the Palestine issue.

In this new era of terrorism, the international community has not yet developed adequate methods of intelligence sharing. In many cases, little communication passes between local and national authorities in a given country, let alone between countries. If governments do not work together and establish a viable intelligence community, the war on terror cannot be won. Another important aspect of this war is the ideological conflict between the Western vision of democratization and the Islamic extremist vision of fundamentalism. This battle for hearts and minds has a legal aspect: defining appropriate means of combating terrorism. In many cases, it may be necessary to take action against individuals and groups that do not actually "pull the trigger" -- for example, those who provide material support to terrorists. Even in free societies, individuals cannot be permitted to promote specific acts of violence without consequence. Accordingly, societies may need to define what constitutes unacceptable speech in sensitive venues such as community centers, public forums, and even places of worship. At minimum, representatives of the intelligence community should have some degree of authority to observe what goes on in such places. Even if the

silent majority in a given community or religious group does not believe in violence, their leaders may have other inclinations.

Robert Leiken

A generation of European Muslims has become so disaffected that some among them are willing to commit heinous acts of violence. This disaffected constituency consists of two main elements: "insiders" born to immigrant parents in Europe, and "outsiders" involved in political Islam and, more often than not, responsible for incitement of "insiders." Some European countries have failed to emphasize assimilation, which would allow the Muslim immigrant community to develop a religious identity separate from national identity. Consequently, even second- and third-generation immigrants often feel lost, and those who are upwardly mobile are more likely to strike out against their new home countries. If Europe could enlist the aid of systematically trained local imams versed in the language of their country of residence, it would greatly ameliorate the persistent identity crisis and resultant backlash. Such efforts could be part of a broader move toward cultural understanding.

Among European nations, France has the most exemplary counterterrorism intelligence -- a result of government credibility and legitimacy with the populace. French citizens do not view their country's intelligence services as "Big Brother"; they are confident that their civil liberties will be preserved. Yet, France rarely shares intelligence with other European Union member states. For example, Spanish and French authorities have sometimes conducted surveillance on the same individual simultaneously without being aware of each other's efforts. The dearth of transnational communication is a serious problem in the war on terror.

Europe must also guard its borders more closely against illegal immigrants if it hopes to reduce the threat of Islamic extremism. Lack of progress on this front fuels the crisis of unwelcome immigrants and the extremist ideology they sometimes generate. If businesses adopted -- and governments enforced -- strict rules about employing only legal residents, the temptation for individuals to enter Europe illegally would lose much of its allure.

Jacques Pitteloud

The composition of European society has changed radically in recent years, becoming significantly less homogeneous due to the influx of immigrants from the developing world. Europe has bungled efforts to assimilate its foreign minorities. The lack of a comprehensive continental identity, as illustrated by the recent rejection of the proposed European Union constitution, is further exemplified by the fact that many Muslim immigrants feel compelled to turn to Islam as compensation for the absence of national identity. Extremism prevails because radical leaders are seen as the primary voice speaking for Islam.

The failure of European counterterrorism measures to curb extremism has arisen from the inability of police and intelligence forces to adapt to the increasingly multicultural nature of European society. This problem is partly rooted in the pervasive fear that prevents immigrants from turning to unfamiliar authorities. Moreover, authorities in many countries are not permitted to enter mosques, which significantly reduces their ability to establish stronger relations with the Muslim community.

The most important aspect of the war on terror is the battle for hearts and minds. The only sure way to prevent the ghettos of Europe from becoming breeding grounds for terrorists is to contest the indoctrination of Muslims to extremist values. Currently, too much focus is placed on uncovering logistical and financial support networks. Europe has not had much success following the money trail, so additional measures are called for.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jamie Chosak.

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