

The Matrix of International Terrorism: The Global Jihadist Threat

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In-Depth Reports

Rohan Gunaratna, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies: I will focus on three areas: first, the post-September 11, 2001, evolution of al-Qaeda; second, the associated organizations currently working with al-Qaeda; and finally, the global response to terrorism. Al-Qaeda was created in March 1988, and for ten years it was neither engaged nor targeted. It shifted from its main base in Peshawar, Pakistan, to Sudan, and from December 1991 to May 1996 the organization expanded its activities into the European and African arenas. After May 1996, al-Qaeda relocated to Afghanistan. About two years prior to the September 11 attacks, the United States recognized the organization as a threat, yet there was no sustained, effective action to disrupt or destroy it. Al-Qaeda grew in size, strength, and influence until the September 11 attacks.

Al-Qaeda is the first global terrorist network of the twenty-first century. It is global in the sense that it recruits from forty-seven different countries and it can operate on every continent. It was able to provide state-of-the-art terrorist training for forty different Islamist groups from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucuses. That training was conducted primarily in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s while the international community looked the other way. In many ways, Afghanistan was a terrorist Disneyland.

Since the September 11 attacks, we have seen, on average, one attack every three months. Almost all of these attacks have been conducted not by al-Qaeda, but by associated organizations. That is because al-Qaeda has suffered significantly since September 11. About 4,100 members of al-Qaeda and associated organizations have been arrested in 102 countries during the past two years. Al-Qaeda itself is a very small group, with only 4,000 members. But because al-Qaeda, together with the Taliban, trained a large number of terrorists throughout the 1990s, we estimate the total cohort of Islamists trained in Afghanistan to number between 70,000 and 130,000. So there is a significant pool from which al-Qaeda, as well as its associated groups operating in the Global South, can recruit.

I would illustrate the nature of the current threat posed by al-Qaeda by looking at two waves of attacks that al-Qaeda staged in October 2002 and May 2003, respectively. On October 6, 2002, Osama bin Laden released an audio tape that was broadcast on al-Jazeera. In that recording, bin Laden addressed the American people and said that Americans have a barren culture. He urged Americans to convert to Islam; otherwise, his followers would attack

them. U.S. intelligence operatives played this tape to two of the most senior al-Qaeda members in their custody. They were Ramsi bin Alsheebh, the logistics coordinator of the September 11 attacks, and Abu Zubeda, a Palestinian who was working with al-Qaeda in a very senior position. Both men suggested that bin Laden was trying to emulate the Prophet Mohammad, who before subduing his opponents urged them to convert to Islam.

Both al-Qaeda men in custody told their interrogators that attacks were imminent. And on October 6, the French oil tanker Lindbergh was attacked off the coast of Yemen. Al-Qaeda had planned to strike a U.S. warship, but it never arrived. So al-Qaeda attacked a target of opportunity. Then, on October 8, two snipers killed one American soldier and injured another in Kuwait. On October 12, in Bali, an al-Qaeda-associated Southeast Asian terrorist group called Jamaah al-Islamiya conducted an attack killing 202 people, of whom eighty-eight were Australian.

On May 12, 2002, al-Qaeda conducted simultaneous suicide attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and in Chechnya. The group responsible for the attack in Chechnya is al-Ansar, also known as the International Islamic Brigade. A man called Abu Wahlid heads this group. Abu Wahlid's real name is Mohammad al-Gamdi. He is a cousin of two of the September 11 hijackers, Hamsa and al-Hamid al-Gamdi, who crashed the plane into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. On May 14, the al-Ansar group conducted another suicide attack in Chechnya, killing and injuring about 100 people.

On May 15, in southern Karachi province, Pakistan, another group associated with al-Qaeda called Lashkari Jhangvi -- which shared al-Qaeda's training infrastructure in Afghanistan -- destroyed twenty-one Caltex and Shell gas stations within half an hour. Then on May 16 (the Friday of that week), in Casablanca, Morocco, another al-Qaeda-associated group called Assirat al-Moustaqim, or the Straight Path, conducted simultaneous suicide attacks against Moroccan Jewish targets. In five days in May, there were five attacks. Of those five attacks, al-Qaeda conducted only one, the May 12 Riyadh attack. The other four attacks were carried out by groups armed, trained, and financed by al-Qaeda. Of the three attacks in October, the most devastating was conducted by Jamaah al-Islamiya, another group trained and financed by al-Qaeda. More importantly, these groups get their unifying ideology from al-Qaeda.

The other groups that we know of have very local territorial reaches and ideologies. For example, the Moro groups in the Philippines are fighting to create a Moro territory in the southern Philippines. The Egyptian groups operate only in Egypt. The Algerian groups operate only in Algeria. The Palestinian groups operate only in Palestine. But al-Qaeda believes it is fighting a global jihad, and it has infused these local groups with the idea that they must fight not only at the local level, but also at the global level. The scale of threat has changed accordingly. Two years after the September 11 attacks, the concern has clearly shifted beyond al-Qaeda, particularly as several high-ranking al-Qaeda members have been arrested or killed.

There are three reasons, other than the weakening of al-Qaeda, why the United States has not witnessed another attack on the scale of September 11. One is heightened public vigilance. As long as the government is willing and able to place relevant threat information in the public domain, the public will remain alert. An example of a terrorist operation disrupted as a result of public alertness is that of Richard Reid, the shoe bomber. He tried to ignite explosives in his shoe on board an American Airlines flight, but alert passengers stopped him and prevented that plane from going down.

The second factor is an unprecedented degree of cooperation among the law enforcement, intelligence, and military communities. Two of the most significant developments since the September 11 attacks are the Pentagon's attempts to increase its intelligence capability and the CIA's attempts to increase its paramilitary capability. This kind of cooperation has prevented many attacks. In addition, the United States is increasingly sharing intelligence with other Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and European agencies, which it was largely reluctant to do prior to September 11.

The third factor is that al-Qaeda and its associated groups are being aggressively hunted. As long as you hunt a terrorist group, you do not give that group sufficient time, space, and resources to plan or prepare big attacks. It is very important to maintain the pressure -- not only on al-Qaeda, but also on associated organizations.

We have all learned a very important lesson since September 11. We have entered a period of history in which we will have to live with the terrorist threat for some time. It is like common, economically motivated crime. We will have to effectively manage this threat. We will have to target terrorist leaders, ideologues, and operatives. At the same time, we will have to disrupt the terrorist support networks that are still very active in western Europe and North America.

To fight the contemporary wave of terrorism, we need a multipronged and multidimensional response, one that has not only military, but also political, economic, ideological, and diplomatic facets. We need a multiagency response. Traditionally, the intelligence community and law enforcement agencies fought terrorism. But today, we have to bring in private security professionals and educational institutions. Many other actors are involved. The fight against terrorism must also be multijurisdictional. The modern terrorist will recruit in one theater, train in another, and attack in a third; for example, in the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda recruited members from Germany, trained them in Afghanistan, and attacked the United States. Finally, the response must be multinational. No country can fight terrorism alone. As long as the United States is able to maintain an international coalition, we will be able to reduce the threat of terrorism effectively.

Edward Beck: We are tracking down al-Qaeda, and we have made a great deal of progress. You see some of that progress in the news media. Some of it you do not see. Our enemy is somewhat fragmented, which makes fighting it more difficult. Many of Osama bin Laden's lieutenants, who have great potential to do us harm, remain free. But we are working against them.

Today, I plan to discuss the issue of state sponsorship -- specifically that of Iran and Syria and their involvement with the intifada violence. The Islamic Republic sees terrorism as a policy option -- a way to help promote its ideological, geostrategic, and national-security goals. From an Iranian national-security standpoint, it is a good thing if your regional enemy is preoccupied with an internal security nightmare, as Israel is with the intifada. That strategic consideration, of course, is buttressed by Iran's longstanding ideological considerations.

But Iran's behavior goes beyond anti-Israeli violence. Frankly, Iran is almost in a league of its own when it comes to state sponsorship of terrorism. Iran hides terrorists. It gives them sanctuary and safe haven. It supports the Hizballah terrorist leader Imad Mughniyeh and allows him routinely to come and go. Ahmad Ibrahim al-Mughassil, who was involved in the Khobar Towers bombing, is believed to enjoy safe haven in Iran. In addition, some al-Qaeda associates have been in Iran at one point or another in recent years. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a stalwart of the regime and of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is behind much of this activity, along with the Iranian Intelligence Ministry. Tehran funds and equips those who train terrorists, including Hizballah, Hamas, and other Palestinian rejectionists.

Recall the Karine-A arms seizure by Israel in January 2002. The incident involved fifty tons of arms destined for Palestinian rejectionists. Rightly or wrongly, Yasir Arafat took much of the flack for that incident. But many of those arms were made in Iran and Iran was involved in the transshipment. This will not help to bring peace to the Levant. Iran also facilitates and encourages cooperation among terrorist groups. Hizballah is the eldest and most sophisticated child, if you will, of the Iranian regime. Now, we see the organization coming into its own. Hizballah and Iran are working together to help the Palestinian rejectionists such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

Another way Iran encourages cooperation as a state sponsor is by hosting periodic conferences. Tehran brings

members of the above-mentioned groups together to promote the intifada. Iran also encourages and glorifies terrorist attacks by Hizballah and other groups. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, has said that suicide bombings are "the zenith of honor" for young persons who are sacrificing their lives to serve the interests of their nation and religion, and has declared, "The climax of this resistance can be seen in the martyrdom-seeking operations." Moreover, Iranian ayatollahs have affirmed that such operations are permissible and justified. And Iran's encouragement of terrorism is not limited to terrorist groups opposed to Israel. In August 2001, an Iranian newspaper aligned with Iran's religious conservatives urged "Muslims the world over to attack America's interests" in response to U.S. support for Israel.

Iran has a bifurcated government right now. The dominant party consists of hardliners led by Khamene'i and backed by the Revolutionary Guard. The reformist side of the government is led by President Muhammad Khatami. The reformists, frankly, are either unwilling or unable to exert the power and influence necessary to rein in the terror activities. Even they, albeit to a less rabid degree, support these kinds of operations and the stoking of the intifada.

Finally, Iran has used terrorism as a tool to destabilize other governments. In 2000, Turkey disrupted cells acting at the direction of the Revolutionary Guard. The objective of these cells was to make Turkey more Islamic. In the mid-1990s, Bahraini security forces disrupted the Iranian-backed Bahraini Hizballah attempting to overthrow the Bahraini regime. Similar events took place in Azerbaijan at that time. Right now we see how Iran is exerting its influence in Iraq. Iran certainly has an interest in that country, but the way in which it is trying to gain more influence should concern us.

Whereas Iran's sponsorship of terrorism is very broad, Syria is much more focused on Israel and on the situation in the Levant. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Damascus in May and talked with the Syrians specifically about their support for Palestinian rejectionist groups. Typically, as a Syrian response, we have seen some cosmetic changes. Syria has tried to lower the profile of Palestinian rejectionist groups operating out of Damascus. But some of this activity has simply shifted to Lebanon, where Syria maintains significant control. I can assure you that our policymakers are pushing this issue very hard with Damascus. That said, Syria has been marginally helpful on some issues related to al-Qaeda. I am not sure how much of this is because Damascus wants to be helpful to the United States, and how much is because Syria does not like al-Qaeda either.

Matthew Levitt, The Washington Institute: The title of our panel is "The Matrix of International Terrorism," and that is a useful way of thinking about this topic. "Matrix." "Network." "Web." These words are accurate descriptions of the nature of international terrorism today. International terrorism no longer simply consists of known groups that you can put in separate, perfectly square boxes. International terrorism today is defined by relationships. We find individuals that we might classify as al-Qaeda interacting with or funding Hizballah members or Palestinian groups. Such relationships are not necessarily conducted at a headquarters-to-headquarters level. These are person-to-person interactions. You will never find in their safe houses an agreement whereby they have signed on to participate in common activity.

But these relationships, if we pay attention to them, open our eyes to the ways in which groups interact and help us to understand the nature of the threat. It is no longer useful simply to think about religiously fanatical or secular zealots that do not talk to one another. We know that Islamic fundamentalists and rabid secular nationalists will now work together. Mr. Beck mentioned Iranian support for the PFLP-GC, which is at core a Marxist organization headed by Ahmed Jibril. Jibril has gone through a religious transformation of sorts over the past few years that no one believes is all that heartfelt, but which suits a purpose.

In this regard, whatever relationship that may or may not have existed between Saddam Husayn's regime and al-Qaeda elements in Iraq would not be a surprise. Some have asked, "Why would a secular regime interact with Islamic fundamentalists?" Those relationships may not have been as close as some thought; there is an open debate

about that now. But it was insufficient for people to say that Saddam would never work with the fundamentalists. Ideological elements will happily work with criminal elements. We have seen this time and again in postwar Iraq. We know that at least one recent bombing was conducted by Iraqi criminal elements who were released from jail in the last days of the Saddam Husayn regime. They were involved in these attacks simply because there was money to be had.

Sunni groups are also cooperating very closely with Shi'i groups. Iran and Hizballah are well known for financing, training, and facilitating the activities of Turkish Sunni groups and all the Palestinian groups. Hizballah was extremely active in terrorist operational planning throughout Southeast Asia, beginning in the 1990s and continuing today. Almost all of the Hizballah operatives recruited from Southeast Asia were Sunnis, although Hizballah is a Shi'i organization. Lebanese Hizballah would typically send a senior terrorist operative, someone reporting directly to or through links in the chain to Imad Mughniyeh. Once there, this operative would recruit others, in these cases primarily Sunnis. Given the understanding people had of international terrorism at the time, this was extremely surprising. Well, we need not be surprised anymore. As another example, consider the cooperation between Mohamed Zouaydi, the head of al-Qaeda's Madrid cell, and elements of the Basque terrorist group Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA) in the north, involving logistical and financial cooperation.

In general, the Muslim diaspora is a melting pot for radical causes. In my days working on these issues at the FBI, I often had to explain to agents in the field why they should not be surprised when elements of various groups, each devoted to various causes -- some religious, some not; some Sunni, some Shi'i -- are found working together. In the diaspora, there may be only one mosque in town. There may not be a Shi'i mosque and a Sunni mosque. There may not be one mosque preferred by the radicals and one that is preferred by the moderates. And so it is common, especially in the diaspora, to see various elements -- even those coming from different religious perspectives -- working together.

I am reminded of an academic who went to Beirut to interview some Lebanese Hizballah operatives. He was waiting for a meeting with a midlevel operative who was running late. A few minutes later, a young man wearing a New York Yankees baseball cap walked in. The guy opened his mouth and started speaking in perfect American English. The academic was rather surprised to see a midlevel Hizballah operative speaking in American English and wearing a Yankees cap. The Hizballah operative said to the academic, "Don't be so surprised. I spent a few years in Washington. I am a huge Yankees fan. We do not carry membership cards in our wallets, and we are everywhere." Bernard Lewis has often said that terrorists tell us all kinds of things about themselves and their intentions, but we tend not to listen. Perhaps it is time we started listening.

The links among various terrorist groups have operational meanings, too. When Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his address to the United Nations, I immediately got calls from the media. Reporters asked for an almost Talmudic clarification of what Powell meant when he described Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as an "associate and collaborator" of al-Qaeda -- not a member, not an operative, but an associate. Does this mean that he is not al-Qaeda? If he is not al-Qaeda, does this implicate al-Qaeda? What exactly is the meaning of his choice of words? I laughed, because it demonstrated the lack of understanding of international terrorism today. It really makes no difference. Al-Zarqawi does not have to be a card-carrying member of al-Qaeda. He does not have to be one of the few individuals who has actually pledged a tabayu, an oath of allegiance to bin Laden.

It is sufficient to have gone through al-Qaeda's training camps. Or it is sufficient to have liaised and hooked up with others who have trained and fought together in Bosnia, Chechnya, or elsewhere. It is sufficient that, as a commander of Ansar al-Islam -- the al-Qaeda affiliate network that was operating out of the Kurdish areas until the Iraq war -- al-Zarqawi was connected to the Tawhid movement in Europe and to the assassination of Laurence Foley in Jordan. The nature of the relationship is what matters, as does trying to figure out whom al-Zarqawi was meeting when he

was in Syria at the time of the Foley assassination. Al-Zarqawi clearly has al-Qaeda affiliations.

So deciding whether to describe something as an al-Qaeda attack or an attack by an al-Qaeda affiliate is sometimes more semantic than useful. Consider the al-Aqsa International Foundation, which is one of the Hamas front organizations that the United States has listed for asset forfeiture. Several individual European countries have joined the United States in including the foundation on their terrorism lists, but the European Union has, despite its recent decision to ban Hamas, not yet issued a directive to freeze the foundation's assets. The al-Aqsa International Foundation is a great example of the networks of links and relationships among international terrorists. It is primarily a Hamas front, although by several reports one of its organizations in the Netherlands was also funding Hizballah.

Far more interesting is the case of Shaykh Mohammad Ali Hassan al-Moayad, who headed the foundation's office in Yemen. Al-Moayad is in custody in Germany, and the United States is seeking his extradition because we know, after conducting an FBI sting operation, that he was proactively funding, arming, and providing recruits for al-Qaeda to the tune of millions of dollars. In an interesting twist, while unknowingly speaking to an FBI confidential informant (an undercover source) ostensibly working for al-Qaeda, al-Moayad apparently bragged that he was a radical and someone who could be trusted with funds. He said, "Don't worry, I have facilitated plenty of money to Interpal." Interpal is one of the Hamas front organizations that the United States and Great Britain recently shut down in London. So, in his effort to prove his bona fides to al-Qaeda, al-Moayad bragged of how successfully he funneled money to Hamas.

Before I close, I want to make a comment about Hizballah. In his presentation, Dr. Gunaratna said -- as he has said before to his credit -- that it took us at least ten years to start paying attention to al-Qaeda. In that time, al-Qaeda built an international infrastructure, representing the most critical lapse on our part. It took dozens of individuals, front companies, charities, and others to put together September 11. We are making the same mistake today with Hizballah. If Israel were to cease to exist tomorrow, Hizballah would continue to be an international terrorist threat of global reach. As Mr. Beck pointed out in his presentation, Hizballah is a critical component of Iranian foreign policy. When it has served Iran's interest to employ Hizballah internationally, it has done so. This has resulted in devastating terrorist attacks in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina -- and, had it been successful, in many other corners of the world. It has also led the United States to shut down embassies in places as exotic as Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to run down threats.

Hizballah is proactively engaged in terrorist financing, logistical support, and operational activity in Africa, Southeast Asia, South America, and North America. This past summer I had the honor of serving as the U.S. government's expert witness in a trial of several Hizballah members in Charlotte, North Carolina. The other arm of that terrorist cell was in Canada, where a sophisticated effort had been under way to procure dual-use technologies such as night-vision goggles, laser range finders, advanced computer equipment, and much more. This technology made its way, we now know, not only to Hizballah, but to Iran as well.

The members of the Charlotte cell had close, personal links to Shaykh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who at one time was the spiritual leader of Hizballah. Today he no longer holds that official title, but he is still very close to many Hizballah members. Of greater concern was the fact that the Charlotte cell was operating directly under the command of Shaykh Abbas Hareke, a known Hizballah military commander based out of southern Beirut. The FBI produced the letters and the telephone intercept transcripts of this cell's communications with Hareke as proof of just how close they were on the operational and personal levels.

The Canadian network procuring dual-use technology was operating directly under the command of Haj Hasan Hilu Laqis. I love mentioning his name to people in the intelligence community who are not familiar with the case, because previously Laqis was well known throughout that community as Hizballah's chief military procurement

officer, acquiring equipment for both Hizballah and Iran. But his name had never appeared in open sources until the North Carolina trial. Hareke and Laqis are not unknown personalities. They are senior Hizballah commanders with very close Iran ties. And if you examine Hizballah's operations in other regions, you find the exact same thing.

There is a lot of talk about Hizballah having different wings -- that maybe the terrorist infrastructure is separate from the social welfare and political components. Those who follow Hizballah closely know just how untrue this is. Hizballah consciously and actively maintains very close ties among its various components. Just as Hamas raises funds for its terrorism using social welfare activity as a convenient cover, Hizballah does the same thing -- leading the United States, for example, to add one of Fadlallah's charities to an official U.S. list of terrorist organizations just a few weeks ago.

There are, however, specific instances of crossover between incidents that fall under the rubric of terrorism and those that Hizballah supporters might otherwise classify as acts of resistance. For example, in 2001 Jordanian authorities arrested a group of Hizballah activists trying to smuggle weapons into the West Bank for use by Palestinian terrorists. This activity, by U.S. standard definition, is activity in support of terrorism. But many in the region consider it legitimate resistance. Examples like this are used by many in the region to legitimate Hizballah activity that has nothing to do with other acts of terrorism, such as bombings outside the region. Unfortunately for those who would like to maintain the myth of "two" Hizballahs, the individuals arrested in Jordan -- who, by the way, were subsequently released to Lebanon to prevent political fallout -- were also involved in the attempted 1994 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. (That particular Hizballah plot only failed because the operatives got into a car accident on their way to the embassy and abandoned their car with the explosives still in the trunk.) Philippine authorities have extensive files on these two individuals, whom they did not catch but who later turned up in Jordan.

The Karine-A smuggling ship is another example of ties between two parts of Hizballah. Haj Bassam, one of Imad Mughniyeh's deputies, has been directly implicated in commanding the ship that met up with the Karine-A. Indeed, the Palestinians who were on the Karine-A admitted upon interrogation that they recognized some who loaded the Iranian weapons onto the MKarine-A from their own days in Hizballah training camps (some Palestinians have also trained in the Hizballah camps).

Consider also Hizballah's activity in the triborder region of South America. There, members of what is otherwise a logistical and financial support network -- purportedly engaged only in supporting activity in south Lebanon -- were used in an operational capacity in the two Argentina bombings.

A final example of Hizballah's interwing cooperation involves the Charlotte case. Mohammed Hassan Dbouk was Hizballah's long-time chief military-procurement operative in Canada. He received training in terrorist operations, intelligence, and counterintelligence at Iranian training camps in the hands of the Revolutionary Guard. He was also an accredited journalist with Hizballah's al-Manar television. In Lebanon Dbouk would go out with his al-Manar credentials and film targets for Hizballah. Conducting preoperational surveillance under the cover of al-Manar, Dbouk would then go out with the terror squad and film the operation -- frequently a suicide bombing -- and use that footage to put together propaganda videos. He proudly listed himself in the credits at the end of the video, "Produced by Mohammed Dbouk." A number of these videos were found in the homes of the Charlotte cell members, where they were used at gatherings to solicit funding.

In conclusion, we simply cannot put terrorists, or terrorist groups, in well-defined boxes. A U.S. intelligence official put it this way: "I have yet to come across a Hizballah network anywhere that is free from operational activity." The social welfare, political, and military wings of terrorist groups are not disparate and cannot be divorced from one another. Particularly if we are to understand and combat what we now face in Iraq, we need to focus closely on the relationships between and among these groups.

Bernard Leventhal, The Washington Institute: Is there a connection between the Palestinian terrorist groups and the terrorists flooding into Iraq from over the border?

Beck: The situation in Iraq, unfortunately, is a magnet for the international jihad. We have 140,000 U.S. combat troops in Iraq; that's 140,000 targets. They want to destabilize the situation and cause us to fail. They hope that if the United States becomes bogged down in Iraq and has to focus on stabilization and combating the invading international jihadists, it will not be focusing on the larger war on terrorism.

Gunaratna: If you monitor al-Qaeda websites, you see that the jihadists have identified Iraq as the new land of jihad. Today, most of the Islamists who are coming to Iraq are coming from Iraq's immediate neighborhood -- Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Increasingly, we will see more radicalized Muslims and members of Islamist terrorist groups coming from Chechnya, the horn of Africa, and Asia, as well as "cradle and convert" Muslims from Europe. That is the progression we are most likely to see.

It will be impossible to seal Iraq's borders. It may be possible to disrupt the flow of these fighters into certain parts of Iraq by establishing lines of control. But the United States will continue to suffer terrorist attacks from these foreign fighters as long as U.S. troops remain; it is the nature of the conflict. The only way to reduce the threat is to establish intelligence dominance. That means sustained infiltration of their support and operational networks both inside and outside Iraq.

Beck: As the U.S. government representative here, I will make the following point. The United States is on the offensive now. The U.S. government is aggressively going after individuals who would strike us, whether in Iraq or elsewhere.

Levitt: Iraq is a great example of the various elements we face. I know of at least one group that was talking about recruiting individuals, giving them just enough training so that they would know how to use a gun, and then infiltrating them into Iraq to get some real combat experience. There is no evidence that the group actually carried out this plan, but the point is that Iraq was viewed as a convenient place to send people for training. Those fighters could then come back more experienced for the wars on their own home front.

At the state level, we can seal more of the Iraqi border, and it should not only be a U.S. obligation to do so. There are fighters coming in from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria. Early on in the war, the Syrian foreign minister openly stated in an interview that it was in Syria's interest for the United States to fail in Iraq. He explained why Damascus was allowing people to cross the border into Iraq. In fact, several individuals captured by U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq have carried Syrian travel documents. In some cases, those Syrian travel documents were marked -- in case there was any doubt -- "jihadi." These fighters have been captured with tremendous amounts of money. They have also been captured with leaflets listing how much money one would be awarded for killing U.S. soldiers at various ranks.

There has simply been no Syrian effort to prevent such activity, and this is unacceptable. This also explains, in large part, why every so often you hear U.S. officials reiterate how seriously the United States takes these issues. Last week, for example, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John R. Bolton highlighted U.S. concern over Syria's chemical- and biological-weapons programs. That was a message being sent to Damascus. As Mr. Beck said, we are no longer playing defense. This is offense. We are threatened by any location where terrorism and weapons of mass destruction may intersect. And if that is happening in Syria, the regime should be put on notice.

Fred Lafer, The Washington Institute: The panel has painted a very dark picture. What should we do? Where is the head of the snake? And if there is none, are we simply doomed to another decade of terrorism, perhaps even fighting it on the nuclear front?

Levitt: There is a lot going on that is simply not reported. Mr. Beck and others cannot talk about those efforts, but you should take comfort in them. This is the good news. We are safer today than we were on September 11, 2001, for

many reasons, not least that there is now a whole new level of official consciousness about the problem. A large number of terrorist cells have been shut down. Thousands of terrorist operatives -- including leaders, commanders, and lieutenants -- have been arrested or killed. There is no longer a singular operational haven for terrorists. Even Iraq cannot be considered a new Afghanistan because we are there on the ground, and we are doing something about the problem. It is important to mention terrorist financing, an area where there is certainly much more to be done, but where we have also made tremendous strides.

We do ourselves no service by asking when we will win the war on terrorism. You do not win such a war. It is kind of like the war on drugs. There will always be terrorists. Counterterrorism is not about defeating terrorism. It is about constricting the operating environment -- denying terrorists the space, the money, and the comfort to plan, conduct, and carry out terrorist attacks. It is about keeping them on the run and making them look over their shoulders. You can actually strangle a group this way. The Abu Nidal organization was the al-Qaeda of its time, and it is no longer. I submit that someday we will be talking about the death of other groups by constriction.

The question is to what extent we can alter the operating environment to make it less hospitable to terrorists, and more difficult for them to conduct their logistical, support, financial, and operational activities.

Beck: Mr. Levitt made a couple of good points. One was that we have increased the level of official consciousness. I cannot quantify, or even adequately qualify, the value of this development for you. But I can tell you that countless things are going on, most of which are never seen. And it has to be that way. We are going after these groups and individuals who would attack us.

Mr. Levitt also said that we will not win the war on terror. I do not know whether we will win. We will not stop until we get as close to winning as we can. But, unfortunately, there will still be people in the world who hate the United States, who are jealous of what we stand for, and who would not turn from killing us. This is an unfortunate fact of life. We will continue to go after these individuals, collect the information we need, and penetrate cells to provide policymakers with the kind of intelligence that contributes to informed decisions.

Frankly, I think we are winning. We have not yet won, but terrorists are now looking over their shoulders because they know someone is after them. The president of the United States has repeatedly declared that we are hunting the terrorists down. There is a lot of truth in that. At a minimum, we are disrupting their activities and trying to demolish their capabilities, and we will continue to do so.

Lorraine Abramson, The Washington Institute: We know now that for many years students from the Middle East have come to American universities registering as English majors, for example, but then switching to nuclear physics. They then go back home and use their U.S. training against the United States. Do we have people tracking these students?

Levitt: Since the September 11 attacks, a tremendous amount of attention has been given to the issue of visas, student visas in particular. The Washington Institute has been at the forefront of this topic for some time. The Institute's own Hillary Mann, when she was a visiting fellow, wrote one of the first studies on official U.S. monitoring of foreign students ([Open Admissions: U.S. Policy toward Students from Terrorist-Supporting Countries in the Middle East \(templateC04.php?CID=26\)](#)). I would put the visa issue in the category of things that are ongoing but not always reported. This would not be typical law enforcement activity in which people are arrested. It is part of the FBI's intelligence function, where things are done surreptitiously.

It would be a mistake to think that the government is not aware of the problem, especially having discovered that some of the September 11 hijackers entered the country with valid visas. More recently, officials announced rather suddenly one day that the government would no longer be allowing people to transit the United States in certain ways without a visa; terrorists were apparently trying to use a loophole to get into the country and conduct an attack,

either at the airport where they were transiting or elsewhere. On the other hand, the Hizballah members in the Charlotte case had no visas. Some of them came in through false documents procured in Venezuela. Others came in through sham marriages that they consummated on paper in Cyprus by paying some poor woman who needed a couple thousand dollars.

Abramson: How many terrorist cells are there in the United States, and what is being done about them? Are we actually making strides in the war on terrorism within our own borders?

Levitt: In terms of the number of terrorist cells in the United States, I do not think anyone will give you a specific number. Senior FBI officials have recently testified that it is between thirty and forty.

Beck: Individual terrorists and the groups and countries that support them are savvy about how to operate in the United States. The September 11 plot was a good example. As far as how many terrorist cells there are, I just do not know. But the issue of student visas -- along with the full modus operandi of the September 11 hijackers -- is being aggressively evaluated to determine, at a minimum, who is here, where they are, and what they are doing.

Participant: I am from the Iraqi Democratic Movement in Canada. In June I met a Saudi man in Baghdad. He offered me his congratulations. I thought that he was congratulating me for the liberation of Iraq. He said, "No, I am congratulating you because the doors of mercy from God are open to the Iraqis. The doors of jihad are open for Iraqis to kill Americans." This is the mentality of people there. For the past thirteen years, during the period of UN sanctions, Saddam Husayn allowed wahhabi and Islamist groups to work in Iraq. These groups went to the poor and bought their loyalty for 100 or 200 dollars per month. Is there really any doubt that Saddam had a relationship with al-Qaeda?

Levitt: Thank you for that comment. Saddam Hussayn's regime definitely had links to terrorism, and none of us are shedding tears that he is gone.

Jonathan Schanzer, The Washington Institute: The panel discussed how jihadists, during the 1980s in particular, got training, went back to their home countries, and formed affiliated groups. What are the chances of jihadis gaining experience in Iraq and then returning to countries in the Arab world or Southeast Asia? In other words, can their presence be contained in Iraq, or is there potential for another explosion of global jihad?

Gunaratna: In October 2001 we witnessed U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. Afghanistan had a state-of-the-art terrorist training and operations infrastructure. The intervention was primarily a dismantling and degradation of that infrastructure. One result was a diffusion of the threat to the lawless zones of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Caucuses. That is, the Islamist groups in these regions started to compensate for the loss of Afghanistan as a terrorist base by opening new facilities in parts of the Philippines, in parts of Indonesia, on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, in parts of Somalia, in Yemen, in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, and in Chechnya. Certainly, Iraq figures prominently in the jihadists' equation because they desperately need another theater for combat and for physical and psychological war training. If the situation in Iraq deteriorates, it could give the jihadists what they need. That is why it is so important to ensure that U.S. and allied troops deny the terrorists the opportunity to use Iraq as a center for their ideological indoctrination and combat training.

The quality of the fighters and terrorists who came out of Afghanistan was much higher than that of the terrorists coming out of the Philippines, Indonesia, Yemen, or Chechnya. In the sanctuary of Afghanistan, they could undergo several levels of training -- basic, advanced, and specialized. In Afghanistan they also had good trainers and access to many different weapon systems. The loss of Afghanistan was a massive defeat for the terrorists. But it is important for us to ensure that the terrorists do not compensate for that loss by opening new camps or creating new lawless zones where they can go to train again.

Michael Bell, University of Toronto: What is the cause of the terrorist phenomenon? Is it Israel? Is it wahhabism? Is it

corruption in the Arab world?

I also want to ask about Syria. After the American victory, it seemed that the Syrians were panicked. The panel has suggested that currently, the Syrians are carrying on much as they would have otherwise. Is that because they view the American threat as less credible now that the United States has its hands full in Iraq?

Levitt: To deal with the Syrian question first, we have several reasons for the regime's behavior. I do not believe Syria has remained intransigent because of Iraq. We in the United States have perfected the message. We have said things very clearly, especially to Syria. We have fared less well in following through on consequences. And in this corner of the world, people like Bashar al-Asad understand what it means when you speak with empty words. We have to deal with Syria a little more seriously. It is insufficient to send the secretary of state to Syria to explain that there are certain things that have to be done or else. When things are not done, there must be consequences.

The Bush administration has sent the secretary of state to Syria twice now. Both times Asad has been promised consequences, and both times those promises have not been kept. In the first instance, the United States asked Damascus to cease pumping illicit oil from Iraq. The pipeline was shut down, by some accounts, for a week and a half; other reports say it was not shut down at all. In the second case we spoke to Syria about shutting down the offices and activities of Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups operating out of Damascus. This has still not happened. And so we should not be surprised that Syria is not as intimidated and does not take our message as seriously as we would like.

The first question is an infinitely more difficult one. There are many who will say that the international terrorist threat faced by the United States today is simply a measure of its policies, specifically America's support for Israel. To those people, I point out that al-Qaeda was proactively targeting the United States and its allies when the Israeli-Palestinian peace process shepherded by the United States was at its zenith in 1996. It is not in the interest of al-Qaeda to see peace between Israel and the Palestinians, much as peace is not in the interest of Hamas. For these groups, there is no space for an Israeli or Jewish entity. There could be peace between Israelis and Palestinians tomorrow -- we should be so lucky -- and al-Qaeda would continue to target the United States just as vociferously. No, this is a much larger issue tied to worldview. There is a sense on the part of the many groups that cemented together into al-Qaeda -- Saudis and Egyptians in particular -- that the only way to fight their own regimes is to fight their regimes' supporter, the United States.

In this regard, what we are doing now in the region in terms of furthering democratization is no less important to counterterrorism than our tactical efforts. In fact, we are quite good at the tactical moves, even as we are just now building up our strategic capacity in these other areas. One of The Washington Institute's directors, Robert Satloff, has spoken articulately about just how poor is our engagement in the strategic issues of public diplomacy and democratization.

Gunaratna: I want to respond to the question about root causes of terrorism. Traditionally, many specialists have written that poverty and lack of education have enabled terrorist groups to recruit substantial numbers. That theory has some weight. But if we examine modern terrorist groups, they are recruiting from a cross-section of society -- the rich, the poor, the well educated, and the poorly educated. Let us examine the case of al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden comes from the richest non-royal Saudi family. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, his deputy, comes from one of the most well-educated families in Egypt. The former head of al-Qaeda's military committee, Khaled Shaykh Mohamed, was educated in North Carolina as a mechanical engineer. His nephew, Ramzi Hamid Yousef, the February 1993 World Trade Center bomber, studied English briefly at Oxford and later electronic engineering in Wales. What attracts followers to the modern terrorist organizations is ideology more than poverty and lack of education. That is why it is so important to develop military as well as nonmilitary responses in the war on terror. ❖

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