

Targeting Terror:

U.S. Policy toward Middle Eastern State Sponsors and Terrorist Organizations, Post-September 11

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INTRODUCTION

In the first year of the U.S.-led war on terror, a proliferation of reports and studies have analyzed al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden from every conceivable angle -- and with good reason. On September 11, 2001, nineteen al-Qaeda operatives stunned the world with four synchronized suicide hijackings, a terrorist operation the scale of which had never before been seen. A year into the war on terror, however, other Middle Eastern terrorist groups and their state sponsors are the subjects of inconsistent focus at official levels. In the first few months after September 2001, Hamas and Hizballah were placed on new U.S. government terrorism lists, and the primary Hamas front organization in the United States was shut down. Since then, however, these groups have captured decisionmakers' attention only for brief periods, usually in the wake of increasingly heinous terrorist attacks.

September 11 did produce a new political will for taking concrete action to counter and disrupt the terrorist threat to America and its allies. Indeed, in the wake of the al-Qaeda attacks, U.S. leaders came to realize that ideologically driven religious zealots, in this case radical Islamic fundamentalists, are not deterred by the threat of the use of force -- certainly not by limited actions like bombing an evacuated training camp. Unfortunately, this lesson appears to have been learned only so far as al-Qaeda is concerned. While operations targeting bin Laden and his associates are concerted and continuous, similar efforts against other Middle Eastbased international terrorists and terrorist groups of "global reach,"⁽¹⁾ as well as their state sponsors, are markedly less exhaustive.

Among the terrorists subsequently linked to the September 11 plot are a disturbing number of individuals in an alarming number of countries who, while previously known to the authorities as Islamic extremists (and in some cases the subjects of surveillance), were not assigned the intelligence priority they deserved because they were merely "terrorist supporters," not actual "terrorist operatives." One of the key lessons so painfully learned on September 11 is that counterterrorism efforts must target operational and logistical cells with equal vigor. The attacks in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania could never have been carried out without the tremendous logistical assistance of a sophisticated and well-entrenched support network. Indeed, the nineteen al-Qaeda hijackers were

funded and facilitated by dozens of individuals, cells, front organizations, and affiliated groups that provided a variety of logistical support activities essential to carrying out an operation of this magnitude. An individual, group, or state that provides the funds, travel documents, training, or other support for terrorist activity is no less associated with terror than the operative who completes the attack by detonating the bomb, pulling the trigger, or crashing the airplane. As President Bush stated, "The allies of terror are equally guilty of murder and equally accountable to justice."⁽²⁾

It is long past time to apply this lesson to the Middle East. Yet, such statements by senior officials have not been followed by a fully broadened counterterrorism policy or requisite action. Syria and Iran sponsor terrorism at a more frenetic pace than ever before; the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Lebanon publicly support a variety of terrorist groups without sanction; organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan articulate support for terrorism vocally and actively; and groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad continue to raise funds, smuggle weapons, recruit operatives, and carry out horrendous attacks.

Webs of Terror

Al-Qaeda, an umbrella organization encompassing a variety of like-minded groups, provides a current microcosm of international terrorism. International terrorist groups do not operate in isolation, and the linkage among these essentially disparate organizations highlights a matrix of illicit activity. Individual terrorists often work with more than one group in their "careers," spreading knowledge and methodology as they migrate. Terrorist leaders meet and cooperate with one another to plan and execute terrorist attacks. And funds designated for individual groups are often intermingled in a single financial conduit.

Vociferously targeting only some groups or networks within a much larger domain will fail to stem the growing tide of international terrorism. The attacks of September 11, like the bombings of the USS Cole and the U.S. embassies in East Africa, were the product of long-term operational planning on the part of al-Qaeda. September 11 teaches that terrorist groups must be denied the kind of permissive operating environment that enables them to plan and execute terrorist attacks. The West's uninterest in the groups of mujahedin warriors in the years following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan enabled the rise of men like Osama bin Laden and the formation of groups like al-Qaeda and its affiliated members. Indeed, Western apathy facilitated the growth of forward-based, entrenched logistical and financial support networks capable of backing terrorist operations on the scale of September 11.

Mistakes of Tolerance

It is painfully ironic that the United States and its Western allies are repeating the same mistakes now with respect to other Middle Eastern terrorist groups that they made during the two previous decades of dealing with al-Qaeda and its precursors. For example, in July 2002, Ambassador Christopher Ross, a senior State Department official responsible for spearheading the Bush administration's public diplomacy campaign toward the Middle East, requested a meeting with the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, an Islamist party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The IAF agreed to hold the meeting -- but only at the group's Amman offices, not at the U.S. embassy in Amman as Ross had requested. At the ninety-minute parley, Ambassador Ross and other U.S. officials sat with IAF leaders, including Hamza Mansour, the group's secretary-general. At a press conference a few days later, Mansour said that he told Ambassador Ross, "Arabs and Muslims view the U.S. as an enemy because it places Arabs under siege, as is the case with Iraq; provides the Zionist entity [Israel] with weapons; and protects Israel's actions against Palestinians in front of the UN Security Council."⁽³⁾ He further asserted that the United States "promotes hatred in the Western world against Arabs and Muslims in the name of the war against terrorism."

On July 31, 2002, just two weeks after the Ross-IAF encounter, a Hamas bombing at Jerusalem's Hebrew University

killed seven civilians, including five Americans, and wounded eighty-six others. The next day, the IAF sponsored a mass rally in the Suwaylih neighborhood of Amman originally in support of Hamas and the "Jenin martyrs"; there, IAF leaders proudly lauded the university bombing as a "bold, heroic operation."⁽⁴⁾ Addressing the rally, Mansour highlighted the IAF's commitment to supporting Hamas and asserted that the Hebrew University attack cost \$50,000. "This necessitates giving large financial aid to the Palestinian people to carry out more operations of this kind," Mansour said. He further urged Jordanians and the larger Arab nation "to contribute generously to the Palestinian people so that they could buy the weapons and necessary equipment for confronting the Israeli arrogance."

Although engaging in a concerted public diplomacy campaign is critical, America's "zero tolerance" for terrorism is severely undermined when senior U.S. officials engage in dialogue with groups and individuals directly linked to terrorist groups. It remains to be seen whether the administration will now freeze the funds of the IAF and bar its leaders from entering the United States under powers recently granted by postSeptember 11 legislation.

The preceding case offers a snapshot of the past year's trend of actively targeting al-Qaeda while passively tolerating other terrorist groups and state sponsors in the Middle East. The following sections constitute an album of other snapshots illustrating U.S. policy as pursued in the first year of the war on terror.

Part one highlights the effect this war has had on counterterrorism documents produced since September 11, focusing on U.S. terrorism lists, the latest Patterns of Global Terrorism report (the premier annual publication on international terrorism produced by the U.S. government), two recent U.S. reports on Palestinian compliance with peace treaty commitments, and the European Union's terrorism list.

Part two addresses the escalating roles played by Syria and Iran, the two most active sponsors of international terrorism on the world scene, focusing on the intimate bond that these countries share with Hizballah.

Part three examines the facilitation of terrorism by Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, Yemen, and Lebanon -- entities not included on the State Department's state sponsors of terrorism list even as they fund, shelter, and otherwise support a variety of terrorist organizations while turning a blind eye to the activities of others.

Finally, part four focuses on the activities of Palestinian terrorist groups since September 11, highlighting the birth of a new group, Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades; the increased activity of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad; the resurgence of Palestinian secular groups; and the prospect that Palestinian terrorists could begin actively targeting U.S. interests. The conclusion is inescapable: to be effective, neither the United States nor its allies can satisfy themselves with targeting al-Qaeda alone, or any other specific terrorist network. The war on terror must target terrorism broadly defined and all organizations that employ it or facilitate its use as a means of expression.

Notes:

1. The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines acts of international terrorism as those that "occur outside the United States or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear to coerce or intimidate, or the locale in which the perpetrators operate or seek asylum" (Counterterrorism Threat Assessment and Warning Unit, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Terrorism in the United States, 1999: 30 Years of Terrorism, A Special Retrospective Edition, FBI Publication #0308, n.d.). By extension, international terrorist groups are those that transcend national boundaries in terms of their targeting, or in terms of their operational, logistical, or financial support activities.

Terrorist groups of "global reach" not only transcend national boundaries, but also satisfy an implicit threshold of threat or activity. Such groups extend their reach across the globe, either by actively targeting international interests in their home or primary arena of operations, actively targeting international interests in other geographic locations, or actively engaging in logistical or financial support of terrorist operations.

The term "global reach," however, has not been officially defined. The concept of global reach first appeared in Executive Order 13224, issued on September 24, 2001, which lists terrorist entities as "specially designated global terrorists" (See Executive Order 13224 -- Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions with Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, or Support Terrorism, available online at www.treas.gov/offices/enforcement/ofac/sanctions/terrorism.html). Two weeks later, in his November 6 remarks at a NATO conference on combating terrorism, President George W. Bush used the term itself: "We will not rest until terrorist groups of 'global reach' have been found, have been stopped, and have been defeated. And this goal will not be achieved until all the world's nations stop harboring and supporting such terrorists within their borders" (remarks available online at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011106-2.html). On December 5, 2001, the White House Coalition Information Center's "Daily Summary of News, Message, and Facts about the War on Terror" (distributed via email) stated, "No group or nation should mistake America's intentions: where terrorist groups of 'global reach' exist, the United States and our friends and allies will seek [them] out and destroy them."

2. From the president's remarks to the United Nations General Assembly on November 10, 2001. Available online (www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011110-3.html).
3. Alia Shukri Hamzeh, "IAF Delivered 'Clear' Message to U.S. on Regional Policy -- Mansour," Jordan Times (Amman), July 26, 2002.
4. "Al-Rantisi: University Operation One of 60 Operations That Hamas Has Planned To Carry Out against Israel," al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), August 2, 2002, p. 2.

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