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Terrorism: State Sponsors and Safe Havens

Terrorist foothold in Southwest Asia and Middle East still challenges the War on Terror

The key judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate released July 17, 2007 concluded that the U.S. Homeland would face a persistent and evolving terrorist threat over the next three years. The main threat comes from Islamic terrorist groups and cells, especially al Qaeda, driven by their unrelenting intent to attack the United States. These terrorist groups continue to adapt and improve their capabilities. Now the United States is a harder target to strike than on 9/11 in view of the increased worldwide counter terrorism efforts over the past five years. Prior to 9/11, al Qaeda was able to organize and train for their operations in a relatively unimpeded manner in the Sudan and Afghanistan. Concern has been voiced that the level of international cooperation and the public and private investment in countermeasures will wane, as 9/11 becomes a more distant memory. Al Qaeda is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the United States. The central leadership of al Qaeda continues to plan high-impact plots while influencing extremist Sunni communities around the world from Asia to Europe and North America to carry out attacks and augment its capabilities.

Although only a small number of individuals have been identified and located in the United States with ties to al Qaeda's senior leadership, al Qaeda will undoubtedly intensify its efforts to place operatives in the United States. The process of training terrorists in one country and clandestinely placing them in another country to carry out a pre-planned attack has been described by the U.S. Department of State as "expeditionary." This technique is now more difficult than ever to implement because clandestine insertions across borders are harder, reconnaissance is more risky, and the international movement of funds and equipment is more likely to be detected. The "expeditionary" *modus operandi* is more likely to be used here because developing a homegrown team of terrorists over a considerable period of time is unrealistic. In the United States, it is not likely that al Qaeda would be able to recruit a sufficient number of disenchanting permanent residents and citizens with the training, knowledge and predisposition to secretly carry out a massive and catastrophic event similar to 9/11. There will always be small, untrained and under-financed groups rounded up by

the authorities, especially in view of the enhanced resources and counter terror legislation. These "gangs that couldn't shoot straight" can cause damage unless they are controlled, but the real terrorists are receiving on-the-job training in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The arrest and prosecution by U.S. law enforcement of a small number of violent Islamic extremists inside the United States who are becoming more connected ideologically to the global extremist movement, points to the possibility that others may become sufficiently radicalized that they view the use of violence in the United States as legitimate. However, presently the internal Muslim terrorist threat in the United States is not likely to be as severe as it is in Europe.

Al Qaeda is protected and regenerating and improving its capability to attack the United States from safe havens such as in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The tribal areas have been historically outside of the control of the central government of Pakistan. Consequently the United States is in a heightened threat environment because al Qaeda will continue to enhance its capabilities to attack through greater cooperation with regional terrorist groups. Al Qaeda will undoubtedly seek to leverage the contacts and capabilities of al Qaeda in Iraq, its most visible and capable affiliate, well known to have expressed a desire to attack the United States. In addition to the threat of al Qaeda, the militant Lebanese group Hezbollah, a Shiite organization, might be inclined to strike at the United States should the group come to believe that the United States poses a direct threat either to the group or to the government of Iran, its primary benefactor.

In view of the aforementioned possibilities, a more dangerous threat to America can develop when well-educated individuals residing in Western Europe become radicalized and return home to a failed state or a state that sponsors terrorism and are recruited secretly into an al Qaeda affiliate. After receiving the proper training these individuals return to their homes in Western Europe. During this period in Europe they do not become involved with any

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Muslim extremists or terrorist groups, but attempt to get visas that would allow them to legally enter the United States. Similar to a “cold war” Soviet illegal, they will await word to be activated into an existing cell. Globalization trends and recent technological advances will allow small numbers of these clandestine operators or “under the radar terrorists” to connect and mobilize their resources to prepare an attack without a terrorist organization, a domestic leader and a training camp.

The arrest of foreign Muslim doctors in connection with the failed June bombings in the United Kingdom has caused the British government to review the process by which the National Health Service recruits doctors from abroad. This case, however, raises concerns far beyond the British Isles. Three of the main suspects were born and raised in India and had made inquiries about applying to medical facilities in the United States. The three were born in the high-tech hub of Bangalore, which suggests that India is also a breeding ground for transnational jihadists. India has had problems with Islamist militant groups since its independence and many of the militant Islamist groups operating in India are sponsored by Pakistan. Intelligence sources have observed a “growing nexus” between transnational jihadists, al Qaeda and its affiliates, and militant Islamist groups operating out of Pakistan. However the failed June terrorists were “radicalized” while living in the United Kingdom. The largest jihadist threat to targets in India now appears to be Indian Muslims who are radicalized outside India. The large number of Muslims studying abroad could include some who will return home as jihadists and infiltrate Western high tech companies operating in India.

A terrorist environment that is beginning to resemble an extremist crescent extends across southwestern Asia. This crescent that stretches from southwestern Asia to the Anatolian Peninsula encompasses several Muslim states with festering jihadist movements. Iran, Syria and Iraq have a history of sponsoring terrorism, and other states, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, are unable to control terrorist elements

within their borders. This ominous geopolitical situation is beginning to resemble the environment in Europe prior to World War II when more and more governments came under the control of fascists and radicalized nationalists.

Some political pundits have sarcastically identified Pakistan as “Terrorism Central.” U.S. policymakers have been well aware that Pakistan has been at the center of the world’s worst Islamic terrorist networks. The Government of Pakistan is a frontline partner in the War on terrorism. Nevertheless, Pakistan remains a major source of Islamic extremism and a safe haven for some top terrorist leaders. Reports estimate that as many as 900 Pakistanis lost their lives in more than 650 terror attacks in 2006 with another 1500 seriously injured. Six years after 9/11 the Taliban is still entrenched in the Afghan-Pakistani border region, al Qaeda’s top leaders have found a secure hideout in Pakistan, and terrorist attacks within and beyond Pakistan’s borders persist with deadly regularity. Recent deals between the Pakistani government and tribal leaders in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the border with Afghanistan look like an accommodation with the Taliban, orchestrated by the Pakistani intelligence services with ties to known extremists. During the initial post 9/11 period Islamabad’s assistance scored several notable successes in killing or capturing al Qaeda leaders. In Pakistan, a number of al Qaeda leaders were captured including Ramzi bin al-Shibb(2002), Khalid Sheik Mohammed (2003), and Abu Faraj al-Libbi (2005), and Abu Zubaydah (2002) was killed. The Pakistanis also provided significant information regarding al Qaeda’s tactics and future plans.

Weak civilian institutions and a history of dysfunctional civil-military relations have characterized Pakistani politics and have thwarted progress towards a transition to civilian democratic rule. This precarious situation could open the door to a Hamas-style victory. After 9/11 the Pakistani President, Pervez Musharraf, the general who took over after a coup in 1999, pledged to join the war on terrorism. Now six years after 9/11, Musharraf is dangerously slipping in popularity polls. Prior to 9/11 the influence of Islamic sympathizers in Pakistan’s army,

intelligence services, and government had reached a dangerously high level. Pakistan has supported jihadists in Kashmir since partition and assistance to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan dates back to the Soviet invasion. The steady growth of extremist mosques and madrasahs and the outrageous activities of the Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan who virtually ran an express lane for nuclear proliferation seemed to indicate Pakistan was slipping into state failure or Islamic rule. The prior successes must be qualified because the Taliban is still active in southern Afghanistan and seems to be growing stronger and more dangerous from their enclaves in Pakistan's border regions. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leadership of al Qaeda, reportedly are alive and operating in this area.

Since a violent confrontation at Islamabad's Red Mosque, a well-known bastion of pro-Taliban radicals, war has been declared against the Pakistani state. More than 350 people have died, mostly police and soldiers, in suicide bombings and clashes across the country since the Red Mosque complex was taken. A weak Pakistani state and a faltering economy open the door to discontent, alienation and radicalization. It is important that Pakistan stay engaged in the war on terror. The correct management of Pakistan's nuclear program and the management of relations with jihadi elements in Afghanistan and Kashmir is crucial in the war on terror and the stabilizing of Afghanistan. Also important is the continuing cooperation of Pakistan's intelligence and police liaisons with the West to assist in preventing the activities of extremists in India and the West.

Immediately prior to 9/11, the Taliban who ruled Afghanistan, allowed bin Laden and al Qaeda to operate there and prepare for jihad against the West. Recently the Taliban has shown its resiliency and there are serious problems in the southern and eastern regions of the country. Taliban forces raid villages and military posts before retreating to safety across the border. Afghanistan saw an increasing number of violent incidents during 2006 when more than 1400 civilians were killed in terrorist attacks. Militants launched more than 130 suicide attacks this year while the use of roadside explosives and suicide bombings have increased fourfold. The dom-

inant Pashtun tribes in these areas along the border of Pakistan represent approximately 35 percent of the overall population of Afghanistan. These tribes are reluctant to take action against the Taliban who are from their own ethnic group. These insurgents continue to take sanctuary, and receive armaments and money, from across the porous borders with Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan's future is far from certain. Undercurrents of Islamic extremism, competing interests of warlords, ethnic distrust, anti-Western attitudes, and abject poverty threaten to destabilize the existing fragile government.

While Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of failed states that are unable to control jihadist elements, it is also necessary to review the problems associated with state sponsorship of Jihadism. Muslim states began to employ jihadists to further their domestic and foreign policy objectives in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The relationships among the governments of Pakistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen and their jihadist proxies have backfired. An examination of the development of these relationships reveals a similar path. The security and intelligence apparatuses in each of these countries played the lead role in supporting and sometimes creating these militant Islamic groups. The Saudi bankrolled Arab legions operating from the Far East to Caucasus and even in the Balkans while Pakistan backed Afghan and Pakistani militant Islamist groups and also backed Kashmiri separatist groups. Yemen sought the help of jihadist forces to defeat Marxists in the 1994 civil war. After al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks these disparate jihadist groups were emboldened and the state patrons were finding that many of their former proxies were going rogue and found an ally in al Qaeda and its band of transnational jihadists. Now the jihadists' goal is to overthrow the secular governments and establish Islamic states.

Iran and Syria are examples of state sponsors of terrorism. These states routinely provide safe haven, substantial resources, and guidance to terrorist organizations. Iran's Islamic Revolution of the 1980s was the first of its kind. Iran became an intolerant Islamic theocracy that repressed the Iranian people,

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fought a costly eight-year war with Iraq and spread Islamic militancy across the region. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security are directly involved in the planning and support of terrorist acts and continue to support a variety of groups notably Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command with extensive funding, training and weapons. Iran also continues to supply guidance; training and weapons to Shia militant groups to further destabilize Iraq. The Iranian Revolutionary guards have been linked to armor-piercing explosives that have resulted in the deaths of Coalition Forces. Additionally Iran has refused to bring to justice senior al Qaeda members detained in 2003 and has also refused to identify these senior members in its custody. Iran also continues to fail to control the activities of some al Qaeda members who fled to Iran following the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. This behavior, in addition to Iran's aggressive effort to develop a nuclear program, constitute a threat similar to Pakistan in placing terrorists and weapons of mass destruction in the same domain. The combination of weapons of mass destruction and Islamic fanaticism would be truly a worst case scenario for western civilization.

The recent elections in Turkey, illustrating the disagreements between the generals and the Islamists, have drawn attention to Turkey's foreign and domestic policies. The ruling Islamic Justice and Development, headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has managed to tap into rising popular nationalism by fusing it with Islam. The Islamist party won a plurality of the votes. Recent tensions between the Erdogan government and the Turkish military over the selection of a new Turkish president have threatened the country's stability. Turkey's new activism in the Middle East particularly its closer ties to Iran and Syria have caused some concern in the West. Additionally, there has been an alarming rise in anti-American and anti-European sentiment in light of the European Union's reluctance to approve Turkey's membership in the European Union. These trends are not positive for

Turkey's continued role in the war on terror. Turkey is becoming the largest Muslim economy and is moving to regain its traditional position of primacy in the region. Turkey occupies a pivotal position; it borders Syria, Iraq and Iran, and were Turkey to become another radical Islamic state, it would not be helpful to the war on terrorism.

The Time for Urgency is Now®

Now is certainly not the time to become complacent in regard to the continuing terrorism threat to the United States. When the FBI Director publicly voices concern about the possibility of terrorist cells operating in the United States and the Director of Homeland Security opined he had a "gut feeling" that the country was entering a period of heightened risk, it appears the international terrorism threat is growing worse. The German Intelligence Service recently warned that an obscure terror network based in Uzbekistan with apparent al Qaeda ties was plotting a spectacular attack against U.S. facilities in Germany. If there ever was a time for heightened awareness and the necessity for security precautions to protect personnel, facilities and reputations at home and abroad it is now. Presently New York is the most focused city exhibiting a proactive attitude for deterrence. It is appalling that our policy makers in Washington and leaders in many other parts of the country are not as concerned and focused as New York. There should be a concerted effort on a grand scale to increase the awareness of the threat and dedicate the necessary resources to prevent another catastrophic event. The timeline for 9/11 started before the initial attack in 1993 but ended tragically on 9/11 eight years later. Government and the private sector are in this war on terror together and it is imperative that all work together with urgency to make America as safe as possible because the enemy can attack anyone, anywhere, anytime.



The Lipman Report Editors