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Terrorism after the War in Iraq

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The following is a summary of a May 12, 2003 speech delivered at the annual conference of the Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and France in Washington, DC.

Recent reports have implied that, as a result of the U.S. and international response to September 11 and the destruction of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, the terrorist threat has receded. Unfortunately, while much progress has been made, the terrorist threat from Al-Qa'eda and similar radical Islamist groups remains grave. Claiming otherwise may itself create a security risk. The war in Iraq did not reduce the terrorist threat, and in fact, has increased the risk of attacks in the United States and Europe by increasing the level of Islamist and anti-American rhetoric, by diverting the attention of political leaders from the central issue of the war on terrorism, and by encouraging the view among the public that the war on terrorism is nearly won.

Far from being defeated, the various radical Islamist networks have largely re-located from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Central Asia and the Caucasus, especially Chechnya. Simultaneously, they have increased their ability to recruit new types of members, to make alliances with like-minded organizations, to use new technologies and financing techniques, and to strike globally, including within Europe and North America. Recent French investigations have revealed that these groups possess the capability to carry out attacks using chemical and biological weapons. Although U.S-French cooperation on terrorism remains excellent, a great deal remains to be done to ensure the degree of effective international cooperation necessary to win the war on terrorism.

The French Encounter with Islamist Terrorism

France has long considered terrorism a new form of belligerence—an asymmetric conflict demanding vigorous action proportional to the stakes. Over the last twenty years, France has been among the European nations most affected by terrorism. After an intense wave of attacks in the summer of 1986, the French parliament centralized the prosecution and investigation of terrorism. Since that time, this institutional system has evolved strong relationships and synergies between the various actors in the struggle against terrorism, including the specialized magistrates, the relevant law enforcement agencies, the intelligence services, and the more classical institutional instruments of foreign policy such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense. The key, however, has come from specific efforts to overcome the traditional, and indeed inherent, antipathy between law enforcement and intelligence through

frequent coordination and through the development of close relationships between law enforcement and intelligence.

With that now mature institutional mechanism, France has in the last ten years effectively fought radical Islamic networks plotting attacks within France or against French interests abroad. This effort burst in the public consciousness in December 1994, when the Algerian GIA (Armed Islamic Group) began to export terrorism to France, hijacking an Air France jet and embarking on a campaign of bombings within France in the summer and fall of 1995.

Outside of France, the struggle against Algerian terrorism was often seen as bilateral problem between France and Algeria—a consequence of the former colonial relationship and not a warning of a wider phenomenon. However, one of the unique dangers of the Islamic threat is its capacity to mutate and to propagate across borders like a virus. On this model, we began to notice, beginning in 1996, that the Algerian groups were drifting toward the international jihad movement.

Thus, in the course of coping with the wave of terrorism that began in Algeria, we developed a deep understanding of the Islamist threat and its complex and constantly mutating mechanisms. This enabled us to prevent devastating attacks in 1998 against the World Cup, in 2000 against the Strasbourg cathedral, and in Paris in 2002. It also enabled us to see, through specific attention to the groups' Afghan connections, the emerging shape of the international Islamic movement and to uncover the earliest stirrings of the Al-Qa'eda network. That movement, it was apparent, had identified the United States as its primary enemy and had developed the will and the capacity to confront the United States within its own borders. They established cells for that purpose in both the United States and Canada. One such cell identified by French authorities as early as 1996 included Ahmed Ressay, the so-called Millennium bomber who was arrested on the U.S.-Canadian border in December 1999 with a trunk full of explosives intended for attacks in the United States.

The War in Iraq and Islamist Terrorism

The military victory in Iraq was a tremendous achievement. But that victory, while it rid the world of an oppressive and obnoxious regime, contributed little to the war on terrorism, and may, in fact, have increased the risk of terrorist acts in both the United States and Europe.

In the first instance, this is because there was no established connection between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qa'eda, or between Iraq and the wider Islamist threat. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has been mentioned in this context. He was asserted to have links with both with the Iraqi regime and to have supervised from within Iraq networks located in the Caucasus, specializing in the manufacture of toxins. Zarqawi is without a doubt a dangerous individual with ties to Al-Qa'eda and a genuine threat. But there has been no evidence brought forward that he had links to Iraq or direct involvement in the terrorist operations emanating from the Caucasus that were broken up by French and British authorities in December 2002.

The fact is that no government, after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, supports Al-Qa'eda, although some states such as Pakistan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia are used as sanctuaries by Al-Qa'eda members. Because Saddam Hussein's regime did not sustain Al-Qa'eda, its destruction

did not weaken Al-Qa'eda or change the basic parameters of the terrorist threat. This lack of state sponsorship is the main difference between terrorism today and the type of terrorism that prevailed in the Middle East during the Cold War. Accepting that reality is critical to fighting the current form of terrorism.

The way the Iraqi war was managed and presented to the public also increased the risk of terrorism. By justifying the war as part of the war on terrorism, American leaders helped further the notion that the threat is not as acute as before the fall of Saddam's regime, decreasing public vigilance and attention to the problem of terrorism. Simultaneously, the international tensions generated by the Iraqi crisis diverted the attention of political leaders and may have put at risk the system of international cooperation that is so vital for fighting terrorism. These tensions also increased the level and volume of Islamist rhetoric. Arab television stations, especially satellite stations like the Qatari station Al-Jazeera, enhanced their role during the war as megaphones for such rhetoric, leading to vastly increased anti-Americanism in the Muslim world.

Islamist Terrorism Today

Far from being defeated, the international Islamist terrorist movement continues to thrive and is in the process of adapting to the war on terrorism and to the destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Al-Qa'eda, in particular, although weakened by the military operations in Afghanistan and the death or capture of a number of its leaders, such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, still has the capability of carrying out attacks alone or in combination with other jihad-oriented organizations. Since the September 11 attacks, Al-Qa'eda has won over to the jihad cause pro-Kashmiri sectarian organizations in Pakistan such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Harakat ul-Mujahedin al-Alami, successor to the Harakat ul-Ansar, co-signatory to Usama bin Laden's fatwah forming the "World Islamic Front to fight Jews and Crusaders."

This loose confederation has continued since September 11 to prosecute their war against the West. A partial list of their attacks includes a synagogue in Jerba, Tunisia in April 2002, a suicide bombing of French naval construction workers in Karachi in May 2002, an attack on the U.S. consulate in Karachi in June 2002, the attack against the French oil tanker *Limbourg* off the coast of Yemen in October 2002, and the devastating bombing in a Bali nightclub also in October 2002 that killed nearly 200 people. To this list should be added the seizure of a Moscow theatre in October 2002 by Chechen guerillas.

Indeed, these decentralized fundamentalist networks have, since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, re-established a base of operations in Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya, the last open battleground between Muslims and non-Muslims. The seizure of a theatre in Moscow is the final sign of the 'talibanization' of Chechnya which is turning that country and indeed the entire Caucasus region, including Georgia, South Ossetia, Dagestan, and Azerbaijan, into a 'new Afghanistan.'

The Caucasus area has attracted members from several European Islamic networks. Once there, they are drilled by Chechen militants in Chechnya or in the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia. The training is harsh and Islamic militants return from that experience more determined to action than their elders and with a deeper knowledge of electronics and of chemical warfare. The Chechen issue is thus no longer just an internal Russian question.

Recently there has also been a significant acceleration in the recruitment to the cause of jihad, increasing the ranks of existing networks. Radical groups have also begun to successfully recruit ethnic Europeans and women and can easily move across borders. They finance their activities through “micro-financing” techniques that profit from small-scale criminal activities, particularly credit card fraud. This type of financing is very difficult to identify, all the more since the financial transactions involved take place outside of the normal financial system, using the “Halawa” system, a traditional system based on trust, for transferring funds.

The reach of these groups continues to extend across Europe and Canada, and from there into the United States. The porous U.S.-Canadian border presents for terrorist organizations a strategic advantage and, as a result, represents for the United States a serious security risk. The network that included Ahmed Ressam was spread all across Canada, from Montreal to British Columbia, and included elements within the United States. Even more frighteningly, recent French and European investigations have revealed that there is a very real and imminent possibility of biological or chemical attack by radical Islamic networks in both the United States and Europe. The British authorities arrested an Islamist cell possessing ricin, a dreadfully lethal poison, while another network, trained in Chechnya, was dismantled in France in December 2002, just as it was about to launch chemical attacks using cyanide. Such attacks could have killed hundreds of civilians.

U.S.-French Cooperation

U.S.-French cooperation in the fight against terrorist remains very good and has not been affected by the harsh political dispute over the war in Iraq. Indeed, since September 11, cooperation with all of France’s partners and notably with the U.S has improved dramatically. Both governments have no doubt that the fight against terrorism is a genuine war and they share an implacable will to win that war. Nonetheless, much remains to be done to strengthen international cooperation.

The terrorist threat is a transnational and global one. Al-Qa’eda, for example, no longer enjoys the support of any government. While this reduces their capacity in many ways, it also means that the situation today is more complex, the distinctions blurrier, the organizations more dynamic and the evolution of the groups more difficult to predict.

Terrorism must therefore be met by a global and multilateral effort to counteract it that uses all available tools. The U.S. tendency, demonstrated in the Iraqi crisis, to view the terrorist threat as linked to governments has caused it to emphasize military means. Under specific circumstances, such as in Afghanistan, military means are appropriate, but they will never suffice to solve the terrorist problem. Other resources—diplomatic, intelligence, and legal—must be developed for that struggle. Such resources cannot be mustered by a single state but rather demand a multilateral response. France is strongly committed to such a path.