Trends in International Terror: An American Perspective

May 28, 2008

Pleasure to be here with you today.

I want to thank the American embassy and the OIIP for hosting me in what I hope will be an enlightening and productive discussion of the issue of terrorism.

I've entitled this short talk: "*Trends in International Terror: An American Perspective,*" which is what it will be—an individual Americans view of the challenges we face today in the struggle with terrorism.

As I was preparing for tonight's talk before leaving Washington, I asked my wife how I could tell you everything I know on this topic in just 15 minutes, which seemed like a very short period of time.

She answered: Talk very slowly...

Anyway, after that strong vote of confidence, here I am…

But since our time is—indeed--short, let me give you some of my thoughts on the trends in international terrorism I see today:

Let me say a few words about the nature of al Qaeda…

I think al Qaeda today is a different organization than it was almost 7 years ago on 9/11.

Although it still proposes a monolithic interpretation of Islam, divides the world into "believers" and "unbelievers"--including Muslims who do not accept its brand of ideology--; advocates violent jihad to impose a new world under sharia law, al Qaeda isn't the same as it was back in 2001.

In my view, Osama bin Laden, is more inspirational than operational today.

While Osama is still very dangerous, I see him for the moment as more of a terrorist icon than a terrorist operative-as long as he is on the run.

What I mean is that Osama bin Laden is *not* directing day-to-day terror operations like he did before 9/11, but has become an inspirational symbol to followers and potential followers;

He's more a provider of jihadist guidance to like-minded extremists around the world;

I'd say he's more an important mouthpiece for the world-wide extremist movement than a terrorist commander in the field.

He and his deputy, the Egyptian Ayman al Zawahiri, have developed a significant—and highly successful--propaganda machine, using the internet and jihadist media outlets to advance their message.

On that note, let me say a few things about the jihadist "message machine"...

There is no question: Al Qaeda has mastered the Internet for its own purposes...

Al Qaeda's propaganda apparatus is continually "spinning" its message, looking for new recruits, funding and encouraging terrorist operations at the local--as well as global level.

Al Qaeda central, regional franchises and affiliated movements all place a high premium on the media--and release a constant stream of media products, from political statements to films, for supporters and sympathizers.

Al Qaeda's increased propaganda efforts seek to inspire support among Muslim populations, undermine Western confidence, and enhance the perception of a powerful worldwide movement.

Much of the message is that the West is engaged in a war against Islam; Muslims are obligated to defend their religion; and violence may be necessary in its defense.

Al Qaeda uses outlets such as the Fajr Media Center, the Global Islamic Media Front and as Sahab, which receive print and video inputs from al Qaeda and other terrorist and radical Islamist groups, for posting on the Internet.

Indeed, Ayman al Zawahir wrote: "*We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media…it's a race for the hearts and minds of our people.*"

But all that said, it turns out that al Qaeda accounts for only a mere fraction of total jihadist media production, which focuses—not surprisingly--on the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.

It should also be noted that jihadist use of the media is maturing quickly.

They're working hard at marketing their product to increase its credibility as well as ensure message control.

They're targeting younger audiences, who are especially attuned to the Internet, and translating their thinking into other languages, especially English.

Terrorists consider information operations a principal part of their effort—and their production levels are at all-time highs.

The use of the Internet for propaganda, recruiting, fundraising and, increasingly, training, has made the Internet a "virtual safe haven," according to some experts.

The growing use of the internet to identify and connect with networks throughout the world offer opportunities to build relationships and gain expertise on terrorism that previously were available through traveling to overseas training camps in places like Afghanistan.

Since this struggle is, in my view, ultimately, a battle of ideas, dealing with the rise of extremist communications on the web, is perhaps the most difficult challenge we face.

But these Islamist extremist propaganda efforts face challenges, too…

Despite their efforts on the Internet, it is my sense that the Muslim world—in large part—increasingly does not see al Qaeda as providing the answers needed to improve their lives.

They're beginning to see themselves as tools—even victims--of al Qaeda, which is pursuing its own goals, often at large personal cost to the local population.

In a practical sense, the significant amount of indiscriminate violence perpetrated against Muslims by al Qaeda in places like Iraq has significantly undermined the group, resulting in local Sunnis, such as the Sons of Iraq, taking up arms against al Qaeda.

As a result, al Qaeda has seen major setbacks in Iraq—a place they saw as the centerpiece of their global jihad.

In addition, it has hurt al Qaeda's message on a global scale, undermining their potential support base.

Another trend? Some al Qaeda-associated groups are becoming more locally-focused…

For instance, some new groups are joining up with al Qaeda, at least symbolically.

These include: The GSPC (the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) in Algeria and the LIFG (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group) in Libya, which are now known as the al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Mahgreb

There's also al Qaeda in East Africa, based in Somalia as well as and a number of groups in Lebanon, which seemingly formed in Palestinian refugee camps.

At the moment, these groups seem more focused on gaining local control than supporting al Qaeda's vision of establishing a global caliphate under sharia law that stretches across the globe from Spain to the Philippines.

Of course, local successes by these groups could ultimately support al Qaeda's global vision, serving as building blocks--over time--in building this caliphate.

But the most dangerous component of al Qaeda still embraces the group's global mission—that's al Qaeda in Pakistan…

Al Qaeda has regrouped in Pakistan's tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan—now the home of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri.

Al Qaeda has reconstituted some of its pre-9/11 operational capabilities by finding a new home in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)

It has also replaced captured or killed commanders, and the restoration of some central control by its top leadership, in particular under Ayman al Zawahiri.

Although Osama bin Laden remains the group's ideological figurehead, Zawahiri has emerged as al Qaeda's strategic and operational planner, according to US intelligence.

The tribal areas of the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier appear to have provided al Qaeda leadership greater mobility

as well as the ability to conduct training and operational planning, particularly that targeting Western Europe and the United States.

We have seen a substantial increase in the number of self-identified groups with links--communications, training, and financial--to al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan, including an influx of new Western recruits into the tribal areas since 2006.

Which leads me to another trend: homegrown terrorists...

For quite some time, al Qaeda has advocated finding operatives that are already in place in a target country.

These recruits wouldn't need passports or even to travel across borders to undertake their terrorist acts.

They would be locals, who would blend into the fabric of society, not raising the suspicions of local security forces.

Osama been Laden has especially advocated using local converts to Islam, who blend into their surroundings and

look like the majority of locals, but who are motivated to prove their worth to their new faith by undertaking acts of terror or martyrdom.

We've seen homegrown terrorists--people living legally in their countries--act here in Europe in the 2004 Madrid and 2007 London bombings;

Other plots have been foiled such as the 2006 conspiracy to bring down 10 or so airliners flying from the UK to the US and Canada—that had the potential to kill as many--or more people--than 9/11.

Homegrown terrorists have plotted attacks in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Denmark and Canada.

The British will tell you that today they're following as many as 20 active terrorist plots; involving over 200 cells and 2,000 people in the UK alone.

There is a sense in the United States that radicalization is increasing in Europe, based on the increased number of

plots we've seen recently—and the appearance of Europeans in other parts of the world involved in violent jihad.

Not to mention the belief that the leaders of al Qaeda and its affiliates are extremely interested in recruiting terrorists from--and deploying terrorists back-- to Europe, people who are familiar with Western cultures who can move and travel freely in those societies.

We've also had attempts at terror attacks in the United States by self-radicalized individuals, who had no physical contact with al Qaeda at all.

Al Qaeda's attempts at radicalization of immigrant populations, youth and alienated minorities in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa continues.

But it became increasingly clear that radicalization to violent extremism does not occur by accident, or because such populations are innately prone to extremism.

Rather, we saw increasing evidence of terrorists and extremists manipulating the local grievances of alienated

youth or immigrant populations, and then exploiting these local problems to create unrest.

We also note a “self-radicalization” process of youths reaching out to al Qaeda in order to become involved in the broader jihad.

In some cases, going back to my previous comments: Face-to-face radicalization is being replaced by on-line radicalization.

There’s also the intersection of terrorism and international crime…

Al Qaeda and others, such as the Taliban, are increasingly turning to international crime to fund their operations.

Of course, terrorist activities and support for terrorist groups have long been funded by contributions from individuals, charities and front organizations.

But today they're also increasingly getting funding through other illicit activities such as trafficking in persons, smuggling, and narco-trafficking.

In particular, in addition to revenue, there is increasing evidence of trafficking in persons' networks being used to facilitate terrorist movement, particularly into Iraq.

And the abundant poppy crop in Afghanistan is being used to support the Taliban, perhaps providing between 40-60 % of their revenue.

State-sponsored terrorism persists—and is perhaps more effective…

State sponsorship of terrorism continues to undermine efforts to eliminate terrorism.

Iran remains the most significant state sponsor of terrorism in the world today.

In fact, a critically important element of Iranian national security strategy is its ability to conduct terrorist operations abroad.

Iranian leaders believe this capability protects the regime by deterring United States or Israeli attacks, distracting and weakening the United States, enhancing Iran's regional influence through intimidation, and helping to drive the United States from the Middle East, according to some experts.

Lebanon's Hezbollah is key to Iran's terrorism strategy.

Hezbollah continues to undermine the democratically-elected government in Lebanon.

We've also seen Hezbollah operatives training Iranian-supported Iraqi Shia groups, both in Iraq and Iran.

Iran is also involved in supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan with money and arms, in spite of the tortured history the two sides have shared.

In addition, I'm not at all comfortable with Iran's relationship with al Qaeda and the number of al Qaeda operatives supposedly under house arrest in Iran.

Some experts believe that al Qaeda operatives in Iran are likely to be behind some of the terror attacks in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia.

Syria is also a major state sponsor of terrorism.

Foreign terrorists continued to transit Syria en route Iraq;

A report to Congress stated that nearly 90 percent of all foreign fighters entering Iraq are transiting Syria.

Iran and Syria also support Hamas in the Gaza Strip, which seems to be a major factor in progress in the Middle East Peace Process.

The number of terror-associated groups that are now running governments is another disturbing trend.

Hamas is now the government in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah has a much bigger say in Lebanon, since the recent peace deal.

Unfortunately, both groups came to the power they have today through the force of arms--and not democratic processes.

This will only likely encourage more extremist groups to undertake arms to achieve their political goals, instead of going to the ballot box.

***I've left the most disturbing item for last...Al Qaeda is still interested in weapons of mass destruction*.**

The US intelligence community is convinced that al Qaeda is still interested in acquiring weapons of mass destruction—biological, chemical and nuclear—and radiological weapons.

Unfortunately, they also believe that if they come into possession of them, they will use them.

These weapons aren't for deterrence purposes like many states might use them—they're be used.

These terrorist groups still harbor ambitions of another horrific, yet, spectacular attack like 9/11—and they believe a WMD would give them just that.

In conclusion, these are some of the trends I am seeing in international terrorism.

I have no doubt that these trends will change as well.

Because one of the constants we see is: al Qaeda and its affiliates continue to adapt their means and methods to new security measures.

If nothing else, these terrorist groups, cells and networks are adaptive, quickly evolving new ways to respond to government countermeasures.

There is another thing that is constant: Significant challenges still remain in dealing with terrorism.

We must guard against not only terrorism, but our own complacency.

Thank you very much.

http://www.defenddemocracy.org//in_the_media/in_the_media_show.htm?doc_id=678719