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9/11: Five Years Later—Gauging Islamist Terrorism

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Like every other American of a certain age, I will never forget where I was on the morning of September 11, 2001. While planes were crashing into the World Trade Center, I sat on the taxiway at Dulles Airport on United Airlines flight 837 bound for San Francisco, just a few planes behind the ill-fated American Airlines flight 77 that crashed into the Pentagon, where I was serving as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. Just two weeks prior to 9/11, my executive assistant had offered me the choice of the earlier American Airlines flight—flight 77—as I planned my trip to meet with defense counterparts at Pacific Command in Hawaii, Japan, and South Korea. I chose the later flight; only by the grace of God do I sit here before you today.

That brush with fate—and the continual troubling news from abroad, such as the British foiling of a terrorist plot to bring down airliners over the Atlantic—reinforces to me that we have *two* enemies in the war on terrorism: the terrorists themselves and our own complacency.

An International Stalemate

Just shy of five years since 9/11, even though we have made progress in fighting extremism, the reality is that the long war against terrorism appears to be far from over. The stalemate in the recent Israel–Hezbollah war, and how it has buoyed not only political Islamists and Islamic extremists, but Iran and Syria as well, is particularly troubling.

Talking Points

- Although we have made significant progress in securing the homeland and fighting terrorism overseas, complacency about the challenge of Islamist terrorism will prove to be deadly.
- We have to be more imaginative and innovative in defense of our interests than the terrorists are on offense. This includes new security procedures, education, technologies, and intelligence sources that can detect and prevent terrorist attacks against American interests and citizens, especially overseas.
- Being on the offensive against terrorists, using all of the “hard” and “soft” instruments of national power, especially cooperation with international partners on intelligence and law enforcement, is our best defense.

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Iraq and Afghanistan also continue to be significant—and highly symbolic—challenges on the terrorism front. Iraq and Afghanistan still remain the central fronts in the war on terrorism. A premature withdrawal from either would only embolden Islamic radicals and terrorist extremists in their efforts, leading to more death and destruction for Americans and others.

But this latest major terrorist conspiracy in the U.K., described by British authorities as an act to commit “mass murder on an unimaginable scale,” calls for us to pay attention to some new, and enduring, lessons as we continue fighting terrorism both at home and abroad.

New Lessons

First, we are dealing with a protean enemy. Today’s terrorists are often “homegrown,” being radicalized both at home and abroad by terrorist recruiters, clerics, and the Internet. Terrorist groups now include women, pregnant mothers, and converts to Islam. The recent U.K. airline plot and last year’s July 7 London attacks are evidence of these trends.

Al-Qaeda, which was a terrorist *group* on 9/11, is now a global terrorist *movement*. Much to his frustration, Osama bin Laden is now more of a worldwide inspiration to his terrorist “disciples” than an active commander who directs day-to-day terrorist operations. Unfortunately, Osama bin Laden’s loss of operational control has served al-Qaeda’s purposes, making Islamic terrorism more diverse geographically, less predictable overall, and more challenging to defeat.

Second, our first line of defense is good, actionable intelligence. That definitely includes vigorous collection and analysis of foreign and domestic terrorist-related information, including all information that our domestic laws and American values, such as civil liberties, will permit. The foiling of the U.K. airline plot and other terrorist plots clearly shows the importance—and wisdom—behind well-crafted intelligence and law enforcement programs such as the National Security Agency’s Terrorist Surveillance Program, the Patriot Act, and the tracking of terrorist-related international financial transactions, among others.

Third, international intelligence and law enforcement cooperation is a force multiplier in fighting the transnational threat of terrorism. The U.S.–U.K. collaboration in foiling this terrorist operation is well known, but cooperation with Pakistan proved to be critical in ending the conspiracy. The recent bombing plot against trains in Germany was nipped in the bud by a tip from Lebanese intelligence. International cooperation in intelligence and law enforcement allows authorities to be proactive, rather than reactive, in fighting the terrorist scourge. Being ahead of the curve means preventing lives from being taken by terrorists instead of investigating how terrorists took the lives after the fact.

A note of caution is also warranted in framing counterterrorism cooperation. When sharing sensitive counterterrorism information, it is critical that the U.S. find “trusted agents” within foreign government intelligence and law enforcement agencies that, in some cases, are penetrated by radicals and/or extremists who are working against our efforts.

Fourth, al-Qaeda and its acolytes continue to improve and evolve their operational terrorist techniques and tradecraft, including becoming increasingly sophisticated in their handiwork. They are already making tremendous use of the Internet for passing operational information, sharing terrorist tradecraft information, recruiting new members, and fundraising. The recent U.K. plot is a good example of their efforts at innovation: These terrorists reportedly planned to smuggle undetectable components such as liquid explosive ingredients and detonating devices disguised as beverages, electronic devices, and other common objects aboard the targeted aircraft.

While this looks similar to an al-Qaeda operation of the mid-1990s, code-named Bojinka, which was hatched out of the Philippines to bring down 10 or so U.S. planes over the Pacific, these new techniques were meant to evade post-9/11 security scrutiny. You cannot help but wonder whether any airport screeners—in Britain or anywhere else—would have been able to prevent the execution of this sophisticated plot if it hadn’t been interrupted before it went into action.

Although al-Qaeda is crippled, it is not dead, and its ability to inspire other would-be terrorists may be greater than ever. Even more troubling are the growing ties among terrorist groups and their state sponsors—and between state sponsors of terrorism like Iran and Syria. While some groups may not seem to be natural allies, divided by sectarian, ethnic, or other cultural divides, they are clearly willing to cooperate with each other in achieving common objectives.

Another critical issue is the outcome in Iraq. A failure to defeat terrorism in Iraq will only validate—once again—its use as a deadly political tool, encouraging others to embrace the ideology and tactics of terrorism. Safe havens—more specifically, preventing the establishment of terrorist safe havens—are also an important issue. In this regard, I am particularly worried about the islands of the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos, Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, and Somalia.

What Should Be Done

Although we have made significant progress in securing the homeland and fighting terrorism overseas, complacency about the challenge of Islamist terrorism will prove to be deadly, potentially making the horrors of 9/11 seem minor in comparison.

Our nation, our citizens, and our national interests are still squarely in the terrorists' crosshairs. The fact that we have not suffered a terrorist attack here in the United States in nearly five years may have more to do with their inability to undertake an attack in the post-9/11 environment than their desire to strike us.

Well-intentioned hopes and wishes that Islamic terrorism is something that now only happens overseas—in places such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, the U.K., or Spain—or was limited to the unspeak-

able horrors of 9/11, nearly five years ago, are not based in reality. This means that we have to be more imaginative and innovative in defense of our interests than the terrorists are on offense. We shouldn't only be looking for terrorists under the proverbial lamppost because that is where the light is brightest. For instance, we need new security procedures, education, technologies, and intelligence sources that can detect and prevent terrorist attacks against American interests and citizens, especially overseas, where counterterrorism or security may not be as vigilant or effective as it is here at home.

Of course, being on the offensive against terrorists, using all of the "hard" and "soft" instruments of national power, in cooperation with international partners on intelligence and law enforcement, is our best defense. Regrettably, the U.K. airliner conspiracy may not be the last of the terrorist plots meant to occur on or near the fifth anniversary of 9/11 by al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda "wannabes." It certainly will not be the last major terrorist scheme we will face in our lifetimes as Americans.

While the foiled U.K. plot was a clear win in the war on terrorism, probably preventing the death of as many—or more than—the number who tragically died on 9/11, equally dangerous to our safety and security at home and abroad is our own complacency about the safety and security of this great nation against the Islamist terrorist threat.

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