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War & consequences: Global terrorism has increased since 9/11 attacks

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(Updated and expanded excerpt from Carl Conetta, *Pyrrhus on the Potomac: How America's post-9/11 wars have undermined US national security*, PDA Briefing Report #18, 05 September 2006.)

Since the onset of the US “global war on terrorism”, the operational capacity of the original “Al Qaeda” centered around Osama bin-Laden has been significantly degraded. Hundreds of cadre formerly commanded by bin-Laden have been killed (mostly during the Afghan war). Several top leaders of the organization have been killed or captured – most notably Mohammed Atef, Abu Zubaydah, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – as have several leading regional associates, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Dozens of third tier operatives have been killed or captured. Nonetheless, the organization continues to function in a more decentralized form.

Bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri continue to provide guidance and encouragement to their followers, having issued 35 video and audio recordings from their redoubt in Pakistan. Since 11 September 2001, Al Qaeda has directed, financed, or played a role in 30 fatal operations in 12 countries causing 2500 casualties including 440 deaths. These figures, from the *Rand-MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*, do not include the activities of al-Zarqawi in Iraq, nor do they include the activities of independent groups friendly to al-Qaeda.

On a global scale: terrorist activity and violence has grown worse, not better since 11 September 2001. Average levels of terrorist violence that would have been considered extreme in the period prior to 9/11 have become the norm in the years since. And there is no sign that this trend is abating. This much is evident from a review of the terrorism incident database maintained by the Rand Corporation for the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), which is funded by the US Department of Homeland Security. Surveying incidents for the period January 1998 through 11 August 2006 shows that:

- The rate of terrorism fatalities for the 59 month period *following* 11 September 2001 is 250 percent that of the 44.5 month period preceding and including the 9/11 attacks. This figure has been adjusted to account for the different length of the two periods and it implies an increase in average monthly fatalities of 150 percent. (Only in January 1998 did the database begin to include both national and international terrorism incidents.)
- The rate of terrorist incidents for the post-9/11 period is 268 percent that of the period prior to and including 11 September 2001. This implies a 167 percent increase in what might be called the average monthly rate of incidents.

- A fair portion of the increased activity is related to the war in Iraq – but not all. Removing Iraq from the picture shows an increase in the average monthly rate of terrorism fatalities of more than 10 percent for the post-9/11 period. The increase in the rate of incidents not counting Iraq is 75 percent.

Another way of analyzing the data is to treat the 9/11 attacks as a dependent variable or as a “pivot point”. This allows us to ask: “What was the baseline incidence of terror prior to 9/11 and how has it changed since?” The baseline prior to 9/11 is indicative of the level of organization, capability, and activity that eventually expressed itself in the 9/11 attacks.

- Removing 9/11 from the picture shows a 300 percent increase in fatalities for the post-9/11 period (including Iraq) or an 80 percent increase (excluding Iraq) when compared with the pre-9/11 period. The comparable change with regard to incidents is 168 percent increase with Iraq and 76 percent increase without.

It is also worth noting, that if we divide the post-9/11 period into two equal halves (not shown in table), the number of terrorism fatalities is greater in the second half than in the first – even when Iraq is excluded: approximately 4772 fatalities in the first half versus approximately 5177 in the second. Thus: there is no support in this data for the proposition that the post-9/11 surge in terrorism fatalities is abating.

Terrorist Attack Incidents and Fatalities, 01/01/98 – 08/11/2006		
	01/01/98 – 09/11/2001	09/12/2001 – 08/11/2006
Fatalities per month	176	444
(minus 9/11 attacks)	109	
(minus Iraq)		195.5
Incidents per month	106	284
(minus 9/11 attacks)	105.9	
(minus Iraq)		186.5
<i>MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base (Oklahoma City, OK: National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2006)</i>		

The Iraq war and terrorism

Among British and American intelligence agencies there is little question that the post-9/11 wars – and the Iraq war, especially – have contributed significantly to post-9/11 terrorist activity and

capabilities – not only inside Iraq, but outside as well. In early 2005 the directors of both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency testified to this effect before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, saying that the Iraq war was serving to recruit terrorists.{1}

Subsequently, both the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department concluded in classified assessments that Iraq had become a prime training ground for terrorists.{2} A principal concern of these assessments was the problem of terrorist dispersal or “bleed out” to other countries. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the incidence of tactical activity most typical of small terrorist cells is much higher in Iraq than was the case in Afghanistan during the 1990s. These tactics include assassination, kidnaping, suicide-bombing of various types, and the use of remote-control bombs.

Most recently, the classified 2006 National Intelligence Estimate, *Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States*, has been reported to conclude that terrorism is on the rise globally, partly driven by the Iraq war. The significance of this document is that it represents the consensus view of America’s 16 intelligence organizations. {3}

In early 2006, the British Joint Intelligence Committee, which comprises leaders from the various British intelligence agencies, published a top secret memo similarly concluding that the Iraq war “has reinforced the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the West and motivated others who were not.”{4} This follows similar determinations by the United Kingdom’s two most respected security policy think tanks, the International Institute for Strategic Studies and Chatham House (formerly the Royal Institute for International Affairs) – one explicitly linking the July 2005 subway bombing to the UK’s involvement in Iraq.{5}

The major bombings in Madrid (11 March 2004) and London (7 July 2005) as well as an attempted London bombing (21 July 2005) confirm the role of the recent wars in motivating and reinforcing extremism. The two successful bombings, both coming a year or more after the onset of the Iraq war, were the worst of their kind experienced in Western Europe in more than 15 years. The responsible cells had only thin organizational links to Al Qaeda – or none at all, in one case. They drew mostly on young, first or second generation immigrants. In the case of the London cells, most participants had only recently converted to extremism, having no previous record of terrorist activity. In group or individual statements, those responsible explicitly associated their actions with the recent wars and the target nations’ involvement in them.{6} One of the principals in the failed 21 July 2007 London bombing attempt, Hussain, reported that the group was motivated to act by video scenes of carnage in Iraq.{7}

Most explicit was the rationale offered by Shehzad Tanweer, one of the 7 July 2005 London bombers, in a video aired by Aljazeera in 2006:{8}

For the non-Muslims in Britain, you may wonder what you have done to deserve this... Your government has openly supported the genocide of more than 150,000 innocent Muslims in Fallujah... What you have witnessed now is only the beginning of a series of attacks which will intensify and continue to until you pull all your troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq... You will never

experience peace until our children in Palestine, our mothers and sisters in Kashmir, and our brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq feel peace.

The most systematic studies of the dynamics driving new terrorist activity concerns foreign fighters active in Iraq – and they accord with views summarized above.^{9} One of the studies, conducted by an Israeli think tank, analyzed information on 154 foreign anti-US fighters in Iraq. The other, sponsored by the Saudi government but conducted under the aegis of an American think tank, examined interrogations of more than 300 Saudis captured while entering Iraq as well as more than three dozen others who engaged in suicide bombings. They came to similar conclusions, as stated in the Israeli study: "the vast majority of [non-Iraqi] Arabs killed in Iraq have never taken part in any terrorist activity prior to their arrival in Iraq."^{10}

Notes

1. Dana Priest and Josh White, War Helps Recruit Terrorists, Hill Told; Intelligence Officials Talk Of Growing Insurgency," *Washington Post*, 17 February 2005; Porter J. Goss, director, CIA, *Global intelligence Challenge 2005: Meeting a Long-term Challenge with a Long-term Strategy, Statement for the Record*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 16 February 2005; Vice Admiral Lowell Jacoby, director DIA, *Current and Project National Security Threats to the United States, Statement for the Record*, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 16 February 2005; <http://intelligence.senate.gov/0502hr/050216/jacoby.pdf>
2. Warren P. Strobel, "Iraq seen emerging as prime training ground for terrorists," *Knight-Ridder*, 4 July 2005.
3. Mark Mazzetti, Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Worsens Terrorism Threat, *New York Times*, 24 September 2006.
4. "Terror backlash from the Iraq war will effect the UK 'for years'," *Sunday Times*, 3 April 2006.
5. David Hencke, "Tube bombs 'linked to Iraq conflict'," *The Guardian*, 18 July 2005; Security Terrorism and the UK (London UK: Chatham House, June 2005); and, Peter Graff, "Iraq War Swells Al Qaeda's Ranks, Report Says," Reuters, 15 October 2003.
6. "Al-Qaeda tape warns Spain will be targeted over troops," *The Scotsman*, 14 July 2004; and, London Bomber Outlines Motives in Video, Associated Press, 7 July 2006.
7. Brian Brady and John Phillips, 'Confession' lifts lid on London bomb plot, *The Scotsman*, 31 July 2005.
8. "London bomber video aired," *Aljazeera.net*, 7 July 2006.
9. The two studies are: Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 September 2005); and, Reuven Paz, "Arab volunteers killed in Iraq: an Analysis," *PRISM Series of Global Jihad, No. 1/3* (March 2005), a publication of Project for the Research of Islamist Movements at the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Herzliya, Israel
10. Quoted in: Bryan Bender, "Study cites seeds of terror in Iraq; War radicalized most, probes find," *Boston Globe*, 17 July 2005.