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## ***Robust Response to 9/11 Is Needed but Poking the Hornets' Nest Is Ill-Advised***

**by Ivan Eland**

### **Executive Summary**

To date, the Bush administration has responded well to the terrorist attacks of September 11. The administration has wisely focused its military response against Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network and al Qaeda's supporters in Afghanistan's Taliban regime. The administration's surgical approach, using air power, marines, and special forces to support the opposition Northern alliance, is the right technique.

However, the recent imposition of stringent financial sanctions against terrorist groups not affiliated with bin Laden's network and most likely not involved in the September 11 attacks should raise a warning flag. If that expansion of sanctions is the first step in a global war on terrorism that would eventually include covert or military action against all terrorist groups on the State Department's terrorism list, then it is cause for concern. Given the ability of

terrorists to hide in the shadows and the erosion of U.S. human intelligence capabilities, conducting a worldwide war against terrorism would be difficult, might create more terrorists than it eradicated, and could unleash retaliatory strikes on U.S. targets from terrorist groups that have not previously been adversaries of the United States. Indeed, some of the groups designated for the tightened U.S. sanctions have never attacked American targets. By taking on such groups, the United States would unnecessarily be fighting the battles of other nations.

It is vital to show that the heinous attack on U.S. soil will not go unanswered and to eliminate the threat from al Qaeda and affiliated groups, but it is foolhardy to draw a bigger bull's-eye on the United States by taking up the fight against numerous other terrorist groups on behalf of other nations.

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## **Introduction**

In response to the cataclysmic terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush rhetorically declared a worldwide war on terrorism. So far, however, the Bush administration has wisely focused military, diplomatic, and financial pressure narrowly on Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network, which has been linked to the attacks, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which provides shelter and support to the network. For example, on September 23 the administration—by executive order—tightened financial sanctions on six terrorist groups, individuals, and other organizations affiliated with bin Laden's network.<sup>1</sup> And rightly so: It is critical that we show that any cataclysmic attack on the U.S. homeland will be met with a decisive response and that we eliminate the threat from the al Qaeda network that is responsible. But it is foolish to poke the hornets' nest unnecessarily by fighting a battle against many other terrorist groups on behalf of other nations. In addition, a focused approach prevents dissipating U.S. energy and attention from the main goal—eliminating bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Taliban. However, there are signs that the administration may be losing that focus by broadening the U.S. response to encompass terrorist groups that do not usually focus their attacks on U.S. targets.

On November 2, under pressure from domestic interest groups, the administration took the first steps to expand the war on terrorism to foreign terrorist groups that most likely had nothing to do with the attacks on September 11.<sup>2</sup> According to Joseph Kahn and Patrick Tyler of the *New York Times*,

The Bush administration imposed stringent financial sanctions . . . on the anti-Israeli organizations Hamas and Hezbollah and 20 other suspected terrorist groups, significantly

broadening the campaign to seize terrorist assets beyond groups with links to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.<sup>3</sup>

The organizations included eight Arab groups not affiliated with al Qaeda; three Colombian groups; two Greek groups; and Turkish, Kurdish, Israeli, Iranian, Tamil, Japanese, Peruvian, Irish, and Basque groups.<sup>4</sup> Many of those groups have never focused their attacks on U.S. targets. Such expanded financial pressure could be followed by wider U.S. diplomatic pressure, covert paramilitary operations, or overt military strikes. Instead of fighting a war aimed at enhancing U.S. security, the United States could find itself in a crusade to "eradicate terrorism"<sup>5</sup> or "rid this world of evil and terror,"<sup>6</sup> to quote some of President Bush's more sweeping rhetorical flourishes. And the president is not the only administration official to sometimes indulge in such troubling rhetoric. Secretary of State Colin Powell has stated that it will be necessary "to go after terrorism wherever we find it in the world. It's a scourge, not only against the United States, but against civilization, and it must be brought to an end."<sup>7</sup> Vice President Richard Cheney has stated that the United States must "make the world unsafe for terrorists."<sup>8</sup> But a global war on terrorism is fraught with difficulties and may actually reduce U.S. security.

## **Conducting a Global War against Terrorism Would Be Difficult**

Although it could be emotionally satisfying for the United States to conduct a global war against terrorism, the practicalities of doing so are daunting even for the world's only superpower. Effectively targeting all 22 of the aforementioned additional groups around the world would exceed U.S. counterterrorism capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike adversaries such as the Soviet Union or rogue states, terrorists do not always have a

clearly defined address. That has been truer than ever in the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The sponsorship of terrorism by states has declined, and more free-flowing networks of cooperating terrorist organizations are arising (the al Qaeda organization is an example). Even if the United States had an adequate human intelligence program, such compartmentalized networks of zealous terrorists would be hard to penetrate with U.S.-directed agents. U.S. human intelligence capabilities were allowed to decline during and after the Cold War, when the United States relied heavily on satellites and spy planes to gather intelligence on nation-states. That weakness needs to be rectified, but even then, a global campaign against terrorism would be impractical.

Terrorist groups that are sheltered by nation-states cannot be eradicated without coercing or deposing the harboring governments. Using military power to coerce such states to quit providing sanctuaries to terrorists or to desist from sponsoring terrorist attacks is easier said than done.

## **Conducting a Global War Would Likely Be Counterproductive**

More important, many of the groups on the U.S. government's terrorism list are not currently focusing their efforts on attacking U.S. targets. U.S. military action against those groups could change that, thereby reducing U.S. security.

The United States is always pressured to provide security for much of the world and often willingly takes on the burden. Domestic groups in the United States—for example, those that support Israel or desire a wholesale assault on Iraq—are pressuring the Bush administration to widen the war to encompass more terrorist groups and their state sponsors. But fighting the battles of other nations would likely increase U.S. vulnerability to terrorist strikes rather than

make us more secure. The extended perimeter—more appropriate to sparring with a global rival during the Cold War—may now be out of date against the much more nimble and agile threat from terrorist groups, which can choose the time, place, and method of attack much more quickly than sluggish governments can react. As the attacks of September 11 demonstrate, the extended defenses of the United States do little to prevent terrorist groups from penetrating them and causing mass casualties in the U.S. homeland. And, as the following discussion of terrorist groups on the U.S. terrorism list indicates, many of those groups will not focus on attacking U.S. targets unless the United States attacks them first.

But if the U.S. government begins to go after terrorist groups that do not normally focus on attacking U.S. targets, it should expect an upsurge of retaliatory terrorist attacks on the United States—both abroad and at home. In the worst case, one of them might even launch an assault with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons on a U.S. city in an attempt to cause mass casualties.<sup>10</sup>

## **Poking the Hornets' Nest: War with Groups That Do Not Focus on U.S. Targets**

Some examples follow of terrorist groups on the State Department's terrorism list that are not affiliated with bin Laden's al Qaeda network and do not focus their efforts on anti-U.S. attacks.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, many of them have now been targeted by the United States to receive more stringent financial sanctions and perhaps even future military action in a worldwide war on terrorism.

### **Real Irish Republican Army (Real IRA)**

The Real IRA is a radical splinter group that opposes the IRA's involvement in Northern Ireland's peace process. The Real IRA's goal is to remove British forces from Northern Ireland and reunite the province

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with the rest of Ireland. The group attacks British military, police, and civilian targets in Northern Ireland, as well as targets in Britain. The Real IRA claimed responsibility for the car bomb attack in Omagh, Northern Ireland, in 1998 that killed 29 people. The group does not attack U.S. targets.

#### **United Self-Defense Forces/Group of Colombia (AUC)**

Because of a lack of adequate protection by the Colombian security forces, wealthy elites, local communities, and drug traffickers sponsor the AUC to protect them from communist guerrillas in Colombia's complex civil war. Although the AUC has traditionally avoided Colombia's security forces, the group's clashes with them are increasing. The AUC paramilitaries have not attacked U.S. personnel in Colombia, much less targets in the United States.

#### **Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)**

The ETA's goal is to create an independent homeland for Basque people in northern Spain and southwestern France by conducting bombings and assassinations of government officials. This Marxist group has also bombed French and Spanish interests elsewhere. In November 1999, the ETA ended its unilateral cease-fire and resumed bombings and assassinations. The group does not currently focus its attacks on U.S. targets.

#### **Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)**

The PKK is a communist group that wants to create an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. The group targets the security apparatus in Turkey, Turkish business and diplomatic posts in Western Europe, and the Turkish tourist industry by bombing tourist attractions and kidnapping foreign tourists. The PKK has been active for 27 years. In 1999, Turkish authorities captured the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in Kenya. Ocalan then ordered members to desist from violence and pull out of Turkey. The group supported Ocalan and claimed that it would use only political means to

achieve its new goal—greater rights in Turkey for the Kurdish people. The group has never focused on striking U.S. targets.

#### **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)**

The LTTE targets Sri Lankan military and political elites in Sri Lanka, with the goal of creating an independent Tamil state in the northern portion of the island. The group uses both guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics, including bombings and assassinations. The LTTE does not strike foreign businesses or embassies, including those of the United States.

#### **Kahane Chai (Kach)**

The goal of Kach and its offshoot Kahane Chai is to restore the biblical state of Israel by striking Arab targets. Kach was founded by the radical Israeli-American rabbi Meir Kahane, and Kahane Chai was founded by his son after the elder Kahane's assassination. The groups do not focus their attacks on U.S. targets.

#### **Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)**

The MEK combines Marxism and Islam and attacks the Islamic Iranian government—both in Iran and overseas—from bases in Iraq, although the MEK originally fought against perceived excessive Western influence in Iran, killed several Americans working on defense programs for the shah in the 1970s, and supported the storming of the U.S. embassy by Islamic militants in 1979, the group has more recently focused its attacks on Iranian embassies abroad and on Iranian military, law enforcement, and government buildings in Tehran and near the Iran-Iraq border. The group has an impressive support structure overseas, which it demonstrated by attacking Iranian embassies in 13 nations. It seems illogical that the United States would want to launch a jihad against such a potent group that is now focused on removing the radical regime in Iran, a goal to which the United States is favorably disposed.

The Bush administration's November 2 executive order, which tightens financial sanctions against the aforementioned groups, shows a worrisome tendency to make

a “global war against terrorism” more than a rhetorical flourish. The administration responded to pressure from domestic interest groups that wanted to use the current crisis to get the U.S. government to “up the ante” against terrorist groups that they did not like. More pressure from those domestic groups could cause the Bush administration to start an ill-advised military campaign against all of the groups on the State Department’s terrorism list.

## Conclusion

All of the terrorist groups discussed in this paper are violent and have odious ideologies. They are dangerous to the regimes and countries that they target. Be that as it may, none of them except al Qaeda currently focus their attacks on U.S. targets. However, they are more likely to do so if the Bush administration launches covert or military action against them in a worldwide war on terrorism. Even foreign terrorist organizations such as the Israeli Kahane Chai and the Real IRA, which would normally have little incentive to attack the United States, might retaliate against U.S. targets. Why should the United States go out of its way to incur the wrath of those groups when there is no American grievance with them?

The United States often willingly fights the battles of other countries—especially when it comes to combating terrorist groups. But, as is evident from Osama bin Laden’s successful attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the USS *Cole*, and the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the U.S. government already has a formidable challenge combating groups that are openly hostile to the United States.

To date, the Bush administration’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11 has been credible, potent, and focused only on those known to have perpetrated the acts. Fighting a wider war against terrorist groups that are unaffiliated with the bin Laden network and that

most likely had nothing to do with the September 11 attacks would be difficult and counterproductive. If that policy were adopted, terrorist attacks against U.S. targets would be likely to increase. The United States would acquire enemies that we now do not have.

## Notes

1. Executive Order 13224, “Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions with Persons Who Commit, Threaten to Commit, or Support Terrorism,” September 23, 2001, pp. 1–5.
2. Richard Boucher, “Designation of 22 Foreign Terrorist Organizations under Executive Order 13224,” U.S. Department of State, November 2, 2001, p. 1; and Alan Sipress, “Crackdown Expanded to all Groups on Terror List,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 2001, p. A18.
3. Joseph Kahn and Patrick Tyler, “U.S. Widens Net to Snare Terror Assets; Expands List,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2001, p. B5.
4. Ibid.; Executive Order 13224; and U.S. Department of State, “2001 Report on Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” October 5, 2001, p. 1, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).
5. Quoted in Kahn and Tyler, p. B5.
6. “Remarks by the President at the Veteran’s Day Prayer Breakfast, Park Avenue Seventh Regiment Armory, New York, New York,” November 11, 2001, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).
7. Colin L. Powell, remarks to the press at an on-the-record briefing at the U.S. Department of State, September 12, 2001.
8. Richard Cheney, Interview with Tim Russert on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, September 16, 2001.
9. The State Department’s terrorism list includes 28 foreign terrorist organizations, but 6 of the groups are affiliated with the al Qaeda network.
10. For more details on this frightening scenario, see Ivan Eland, “Protecting the Homeland: The Best Defense Is to Give No Offense,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 306, May 5, 1998.
11. Unless otherwise stated, information on particular terrorist groups is taken from U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2000*, April 2001, Appendix B, [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

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