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**COALITION DYNAMICS
IN THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM**

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COALITION DYNAMICS IN THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

Ian O. Lesser¹

Diverse Cooperation Against a Trans-Regional Challenge

“Coalition” may be an inappropriate term to describe the constellation of state and non state actors cooperating in the global struggle against terrorism. The term coalition implies a certain agreement on strategy and objectives, short of a formal alliance. In fact, to the extent that NATO plays an active role in counter-terrorism, the current pattern of cooperation does have elements of an alliance. But the vast bulk of international cooperation on counter-terrorism, before and after September 11th, has involved the routine, sometimes intensive, coordination of intelligence, police and judicial activity. Contributions to large-scale military operations in Afghanistan, or elsewhere – although important to current objectives – are exceptional. Most counter-terrorism cooperation has been, and will almost certainly continue to be, of a more prosaic nature. The sheer range of activity – from the most intensive cooperation among European allies, to the ad hoc and often arms length relations with states such as Libya, Syria and Iran, not to mention Russia and China, makes it difficult to speak of a single grand coalition against terrorism.. The reality is a highly diverse pattern of cooperation; some limited, some extensive; some sustained, and some on a case-by-case basis.

Modern counter-terrorism is an inherently international, multilateral exercise. As the dramatic events of September 11th demonstrated, and as analysts and policymakers have long been aware, the new forms of terrorism are transnational, or more precisely, trans-regional. The risks cross borders and may have global reach. As a result, it is difficult to imagine effective counter-terrorism policies pursued on a national or unilateral basis. Again, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon make this clear. The attacks left victims from over 80 countries. Suspects in the attack have been arrested in some 60 states. The majority of the planning for the September 11th attacks, and for Al Qaeda operations outside of the Middle East in general, appears to have taken place in Europe. So even from the point of view of American counter-terrorism policy, understandably focused on “homeland defense,” international cooperation is essential.

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Some Aspects of Cooperation Against the New Terrorism²

Several points are worth noting here. First, contemporary images of coalition warfare are derived largely from the experience of the Gulf War and, more recently, the Balkans. But these are likely to be a poor guide to the evolution of cooperation against terrorism. The Gulf coalition was far ranging and assembled for a specific strategic purpose. The U.S. played an overwhelming military and diplomatic role in the Gulf war, but others contributed substantial forces, and as important, allowed the use of their territory to facilitate American and European power projection. In doing so, secondary participants in the coalition accepted significant political and physical risks. In Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia (FYROM), the coalition activity had a strong institutional basis, through the UN and NATO. These were essentially alliance actions in a formal sense. The “global war on terrorism” is a very different undertaking in coalition terms. To be sure, there are formal, alliance-based elements, most notably the unprecedented NATO declaration of the September 11th attacks as an Article V contingency – an attack on all – despite the fact that NATO has, in strict terms, played a limited role in subsequent military operations and other forms of counter-terrorism cooperation. That is not to say that NATO’s role has been unimportant. On the contrary, the Alliance played and continues to play a critical consensus-building role. The multinational operations in Afghanistan have clearly been facilitated by the planning capabilities and habits of cooperation developed by the Alliance. NATO forces have been deployed to allow the diversion of American assets elsewhere. The use of NATO AWACS aircraft to monitor North American airspace has considerable symbolic and operational value (it is arguable that more could be made of this contribution as a matter of public diplomacy within the Alliance). If Turkey takes up the leadership of ISAF – not strictly a counter-terrorism operation -- in Afghanistan, the planning for this task may well be undertaken with NATO assistance. And looking ahead, NATO will undoubtedly take up the question of whether to develop more substantive and institutionalized cooperation on counter-terrorism, from intelligence sharing to consequence management, and perhaps even multinational forces for specialized “micro-interventions.”

Second, it is important to bear in mind that counter-terrorism has been an active part of international security cooperation, on both a transatlantic and a north-south basis, for a long time. Cooperation in this area has been gathering pace since the end of the Cold War, and has been evolving in response to a changing threat. September 11th has given much greater impetus to these efforts, but they are in no sense new. In recent years, agencies concerned with monitoring and countering terrorist threats have placed greater emphasis on addressing networked and privatized terrorism, including financial interdiction, as well as new tactics, from large scale truck bombings to the possible use of weapons of mass destruction. The focus of international cooperation has evolved, from an emphasis on containing a well-known set of politically-motivated groups, often with overt state sponsors, to addressing more amorphous, less hierarchical terrorist movements, with more diverse religious or systemic motives.

² For a discussion of changes in the nature of international terrorism and counter-terrorism strategy, see Ian O. Lesser et al., *Countering the New Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1999).

Third, the conventional military component of counter-terrorism is likely to be as limited in the future as in the past. In this sense, the operations against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and perhaps associated groups elsewhere, may turn out to be a special and rather exceptional case. The vast bulk of counter-terrorism cooperation is likely to be in the form of more comprehensive intelligence sharing among states, and information sharing among police establishments worldwide. This will be essential to address the very difficult problem of strategic and tactical warning in relation to new forms of terrorism. The problem may become even more difficult to the extent that the post-Afghanistan Al Qaeda, and Islamic extremism in general, fragments and takes on a more diverse and distributed form. In the view of many observers, Afghanistan is unlikely to be a model for future counter-terrorism operations because terrorist networks will be well aware of the exposure associated with an established, territorial base of operations. State sponsors, and even weak states, will be similarly reluctant to accept such exposure. With regard to radical Islamic terrorism, the future is more likely to be urban, and Western – and this will drive the nature of international counter-terrorism efforts.

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, the day-to-day business of counter-terrorism cooperation will take place in a strategic context where consensus may be difficult to achieve. The struggle against Al Qaeda has been a relatively uncontroversial test of international solidarity and cooperation. Bin Laden's sweeping, systemic aims threaten an extraordinary range of regimes and interests, from Washington to Tehran. Similarly, the Taliban had few friends on the international scene. The campaign against Al Qaeda is operationally challenging but politically less stressful than many possible future contingencies. Beyond Al Qaeda and its fellow travelers, the strategic consensus is far less clear. How would international opinion react to an American initiative against Hamas or Hezbollah? Who is interested in a coalition campaign against the GIA or GSCP in Algeria itself? Is the FARC in Colombia a terrorist movement "with global reach", or a regional insurgency? What of the residual terrorist movements that are still very much a part of the European scene, including ETA, the Red Brigades, November 17, and the Real IRA. Or the LTTE in Sri Lanka? To what extent can or should states count on the involvement of international partners in their own, in some cases very long standing, struggles?

Arguably, states with global interests have at least two sorts of stakes in counter-terrorism: a specific national interest oriented toward the protection of their citizens and territory; and a wider, systemic stake in limiting the volume of terrorism worldwide because it interferes with their general foreign and security policy interests. Notwithstanding September 11th, the vast bulk of global terrorism is "domestic" in terms of aims and victims. A more active and comprehensive effort to contain terrorism as a cooperative endeavor will pose continuing problems of definition and relative interest. It also poses a larger, open question regarding the extent to which terrorist risks are shared or divisible. Elements of this question are already evident in the debate about terrorism after September 11th. How much of the new terrorism is anti-American, and how much is directed at the West as a whole? Is regime change in the Arab and Muslim "south" a primary or secondary objective of Islamic extremists? Similar questions might be asked in relation to some secular reservoirs of international terrorism, including potential terrorism with an "anti-globalization" agenda.

New Exposures, New Partners

States are not the only entities exposed to terrorist risks. The private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be severely affected by terrorism aimed at states (witness the disruptive effects of the September 11th attacks on the financial system and the travel industry, worldwide). Sub-state actors may also be the direct target of terrorism, a phenomenon common in places such as Colombia, where terrorist activity often merges with criminal motives. At the most fundamental level, terrorism poses a threat to personal security, with political implications. This is an aspect of terrorism with particular relevance to the current security environment in the Mediterranean, from Algeria to Israel. Moreover, the “hardening” of potential targets within states may encourage terrorists to seek out other, more vulnerable targets, and perhaps those outside the control of governments. As governments worldwide, and especially in the West, take a more active approach to counter-terrorism, this “displacement effect” may actually spur a shift in exposure from the state to the private sector. This could reinforce an existing trend among NGOs and others regarding an awareness of risks to their often far-flung operations. The need to anticipate and counter terrorist threats is already part of the planning environment for humanitarian NGOs in the Caucasus, the Balkans, Africa, Latin America and elsewhere.

Non-state and sub-state actors, including diaspora groups, may also be increasingly important partners, alongside states, in counter-terrorism cooperation. NGOs often have quite accurate intelligence regarding the activities of local organizations, including some that may use their humanitarian vocation as a front for political violence. In some key areas such as transportation, enhanced security measures will be impossible without the cooperation of the private sector. Similarly, the tremendous growth in the private security industry worldwide poses the question of the role of these organizations in international counter-terrorism efforts. How will they work with governments? Are they an asset, or in some instances, part of the problem? Certainly, the proliferation of actors with a stake in counter-terrorism policies is producing a much more complicated pattern of cooperation. In the extreme, it is possible to envision an environment in which both terrorism and counter-terrorism are increasingly “privatized.” In areas where the state is incapable of offering a credible response to terrorist risks – as in much of the developing world – private solutions will be sought by those who can afford to do so, with important implications for the “distribution of security”.

Even in the context of states, the post-September 11th world may yield some odd and non-traditional patterns of cooperation. In the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, Libya, Syria, Iran and other unlikely partners for cooperation with Washington were quick to offer their declaratory support. In some cases, this new cooperation may extend to intelligence sharing, at least on an ad hoc basis. The net effect could be a new pragmatism in traditionally troubled relationships, even if a fundamental change in relations proves elusive. On a larger scale, there has been much speculation about the potential for counter-terrorism cooperation to change the character of Western relations with Russia and China. The experience of the past six months or so suggests that September 11th has done little to alter the basic geopolitical calculus, even if it has “given history a shove” in some areas.

One area where September 11th undoubtedly has given history a shove is in Europe. The terrorist attacks have quickened the pace of EU-wide cooperation on intelligence sharing, as well as police and judicial cooperation. The creation of a European arrest warrant is a clear example. To the extent that Europe continues to develop a more integrated approach to counter-terrorism, at the level of “third pillar” cooperation, as well as within CFSP and perhaps ESDP, Washington may acquire a more tangible *European* interlocutor in this area, just as terrorism and homeland defense issues come to the fore in American strategy. The result could (and should) be a new pattern of transatlantic cooperation that is less bilateral than in the past.

Counter-terrorism policy – and cooperation -- consists of a spectrum of activities, ranging from declaratory statements, through intelligence and police operations, to micro interventions and finally the larger-scale use of conventional military force. Putting aside the question of willingness and interest, some state partners are clearly more capable of contributing at different points on this spectrum. Some actors may also bring specific “niche” capabilities, allowing them to make a contribution to international efforts of a relatively important kind, despite otherwise modest resources. Thus, Norway as a leading source of maritime intelligence, has been able to assist in monitoring the movement of shipping with possible Al Qaeda connections. States of the former Soviet Union, and some in central and eastern Europe, have considerable expertise regarding chemical, biological and nuclear matters. Malta, Cyprus, Switzerland and Bermuda, along with a host of small states, have extensive practical involvement in international financial transactions, and their cooperation may be instrumental in the attempt to monitor and interdict terrorist funding. In sum, new patterns of terrorism will see new and non-traditional dynamics in counter-terrorism cooperation.

The Wider Policy Setting – A Search for Organizing Principles

In the wake of September 11th, and especially in the U.S., there has been a natural tendency to see counter-terrorism as a new organizing principle for strategy. The already contentious transatlantic and north-south debates on how to proceed in a “global war on terrorism”, suggest that this approach may be counter-productive. The question is not how to re-orient policies to serve counter-terrorism ends, but rather the reverse: How can enhanced counter-terrorism cooperation be integrated in existing foreign and security policies, at the global and the regional level? In some cases, this may mean institutionalizing mechanisms for monitoring and addressing terrorist risks, and giving counter-terrorism a higher priority in strategy and planning. This is the likely path for both NATO and the EU. In the absence of a clearer consensus on counter-terrorism strategy (focal points, priorities, limits, a sense of what is and is *not* counter-terrorism), there is a risk that currently effective working relationships among intelligence and police establishments on both sides of the Atlantic – and across the Mediterranean – will become less effective and less predictable as a consequence of disagreements at the political level.

At virtually every level, the problem of terrorism is linked to a strategic context and a wider foreign policy setting. In thinking through strategy and cooperation in relation to the new terrorist risks – and many of the stubborn, residual movements associated with the

“old” terrorism – the international community will inevitably confront wider policy questions. In a Mediterranean and transatlantic context, three questions stand out.

First, what is the place of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation in the new counter-terrorism equation? Almost certainly, it is far too simple to suggest that a resumption of negotiations and a just resolution will “solve” the problem of anti-Western terrorism emanating from the Middle East and from Islamic extremism. But it will certainly help to reduce the reservoir of grievance that fuels key aspects of the new terrorism. One lesson from the failure of the peace process on the Israeli-Palestinian track must be that the traditional practice of incremental negotiation and confidence building leaves too many opportunities for violent extremists on all sides to use terrorism as an instrument of obstruction. The West and others must also reckon with the risk of terrorist spillovers in the event that conditions in the region continue to deteriorate. In the 1970s and 1980’s, much Palestinian terrorism took place outside the Middle East, above all in Europe. Under conditions of withdrawal and separation sometimes discussed as an alternative for Israel, the stage could be set for a continuation of violent struggle elsewhere, with obvious implications for security around the Mediterranean, in Europe, and in the U.S. In the post-September 11th environment, neither the U.S. nor Europe can afford an arms length approach to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

Second, what foreign policy price are we willing to pay in pursuit of a more effective counter-terrorism posture? As noted above, the campaign against Al Qaeda is a relatively non-controversial case. But looking ahead, the choices are less clear and potentially more costly. More active counter-terrorism “engagement” (security assistance, training, and in some cases direct intervention) may mean acquiescing in local definitions and approaches that run counter to broader foreign policy objectives. Regional states may seek a political price for cooperating against terrorist movements that threaten Western interests more than their own. Washington already faces this challenge directly in Pakistan. In other instances, states may seek assistance in managing their own internal security challenges under the guise of counter-terrorism. In some cases these challenges may have more to do with separatist insurgencies and transnational crime than with terrorism *per se*. To what extent will Europe and the U.S. wish to compromise on human rights and democratization when these interests are perceived to be in tension with the struggle against terrorism? We have not had to confront this dilemma in such a direct fashion since the end of the Cold War.

Finally, how will states keep a growing concern regarding homeland defense from deteriorating into a re-nationalized security environment, and a more unilateral approach to foreign policy? In one sense this is not a new strategic challenge. Since the advent of the nuclear age, Europe and the U.S. have struggled with the problem of “coupling and decoupling,” and the temptation to go it alone out of a sense of reduced risk, or a sense of efficiency. In the end, the long reach of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles left all allies exposed, and the only appropriate strategy was a concerted one. Given the inherently trans-regional character of the new terrorism, and the difficulty of building counter-terrorism cooperation in isolation from agreement on broader foreign policy objectives, a multilateral approach still holds the best promise of containing the terrorist threat in the years ahead.