

Ramblings

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Fears Grow that a Radical Islamic Terrorist Network Has Come to the U.S.

There is a growing fear in Washington that a radical Islamic terrorist network is now settled and at work in the U.S.

The day before New Year's Eve, FBI agents in six cities across the country knocked on the doors of about fifty people whose phone numbers appeared in the records of Ahmed Ressam, the Algerian who had been caught early in December smuggling bomb-making material into the U.S.

While much about Ressam remains less than clear, officials in Europe say they have known about him for some time and that he is part of an international network of Islamic militants willing to use terror to promote their vision of an Islamic world order.

Top FBI and CIA officials believe there is a loose network of Islamic extremists planning terrorist attacks in the U.S. "They are taught by the imams that Americans are infidels and that if they kill them they will go to paradise," said Roland Jacquard, an authority on international terrorism. "It starts in childhood."

Some of these individuals fought in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and were trained by the CIA. Some fought in Bosnia. They have also been involved with groups that tried and failed to overthrow secular governments in Egypt and Algeria.

U.S. officials note that the suppression of fundamentalist revolutions in Egypt and Algeria has created a kind of terrorist diaspora. Sometimes financial support comes from Osama bin Laden, who one top CIA official says has set himself up as an "evil Ford Foundation" to provide seed money for terrorists.

An example of the new brand of terrorists are the followers of the Armed Islamic Group, or GIA. The GIA has been one of the most violent factions in the Algerian civil war. Since they were too weak to overthrow Algeria's military regime, many fled to Paris. There, the same GIA has been implicated in subway bombings in 1995 and 1996. Members have also emigrated to London and Montreal, where a gang of GIA veterans stole laptops and mobile phones. Now, U.S. authorities believe, the GIA, or a faction of the group, has targeted the United States.

According to the federal indictment of Ahmed Ressam, Ressam arrived in Port Angeles, Washington, on December 14 off a ferry from Victoria, British Columbia, with bomb-making equipment in the trunk of his car. Later, an Algerian man was arrested in Brooklyn and charged with being an accomplice of Ressam in what federal officials contend was an elaborate terrorist plot. Late in December, federal prosecutors asserted that Lucia Garofalo, a Canadian

woman who was arrested December 19 on the Vermont border, belonged to the same GIA cell as Ressam.

There is fear that a GIA campaign similar to the one inflicted upon France may come to the U.S. The terrorist assault upon France included a plane hijacking in Algiers in 1994 that envisaged crashing the Air France jet into the Eiffel Tower, which was averted when French commandos stormed the plane in a stopover in Marseilles. There was also the bombing of the Paris subway in 1995 that caused eight deaths, part of a four-month terror campaign that included other bombings.

French anti-terrorism experts report that another problem in penetrating the GIA networks has been their diffuse nature. The GIA is said to be split into separate cells, each composed of shifting groups of people who use Islamic code names, and which have no central leadership and little coherent policy.

After Ressam's arrest, U.S. anti-terrorist experts suggested there might be links in the case to Osama bin Laden, who has been out of view since the U.S. accused him of masterminding the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 220 people in August 1998, and posted a \$5 million reward for his capture. U.S. officials say they first became aware of Ressam when he was spotted meeting in Montreal with known associates of bin Laden, who issued a religious decree, or fatwa, in February 1998 calling on followers to attack Americans anywhere.

U.S. officials say they have found a common thread to recent international terrorist attacks: Islamic charities and relief organizations that they suspect are being used to move men, money and weapons across international borders.

Osama bin Laden is said to have relied on at least nine of these groups in this recent operations. "These charities and relief groups are a crucial part of terrorism's infrastructure," one official said.

Money people give for worthy causes should not wind up buying explosives or phony passports. But we still know little about how Islamic fundamentalists use and abuse these groups.

While most Islamic relief groups are said to do genuinely humanitarian work, one official notes that, "Often, only a few officials or a single chapter involving a small part of the charity's leadership or resources is being used."

In recent months, American officials have circulated within the government a list of more than thirty groups they are examining for links to terrorists, at least two of which are based in the U.S.

In January, a team of officials led by the Treasury Department visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and other Arab states to discuss specific charities with their Middle East counterparts. In 1997, Canada cut off government financing to Human Concern International, a Canadian-based group, for what official documents call the group's "terrorist connections." That group is also being investigated by the U.S.

One instance in which investigators said they believed the role of charities was important was the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Prosecutors

said material seized from the Nairobi office of the Mercy International Relief Agency included records of calls to the cellular telephone of Osama bin Laden. Another document found at the office, dated two weeks before the bombing, refers to “getting the weapons from Somalia.” Mercy, based in Ireland, was one of the five private associations that Kenya closed weeks after the bombing.

The list of more than thirty groups with suspected terrorist ties includes two in the U.S., the Global Relief Foundation Inc. and the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development. U.S. officials have been looking at Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development since the mid-1990s. Some government officials recommended that the group be prosecuted in 1997 for supporting Hamas, the militant Islamic group. But others opposed the effort, fearing that it would expose intelligence sources and spur public criticism of the U.S. as anti-Muslim.

The Islamic terrorists are being viewed as something new in the annals of terrorist groups. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, who were, respectively, director and senior director for counterterrorism on the National Security Council staff from 1998-99, declare:

In the past, terrorists have typically sought to achieve their political goals through carefully calibrated violence. They know that excessive brutality would deny them the place they sought at the bargaining table. The Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasir Arafat is the classic example, and the Irish Republican Army’s recent course follows this model. The terrorists allied with Mr. bin Laden do not want a place at the table; they want to shatter the table. They are not constrained by secular political concerns. Their objective is not to influence, but to kill, and in large numbers—hence their declared interest in acquiring chemical and even nuclear weapons. It is just this combination—religious motivation and a desire to inflict catastrophic damage—that is new to terrorism.

Before 1990, the State Department’s annual terrorism survey noted few religiously motivated attacks. Since then, the number has grown, and with it the number of deaths has increased sharply.

The U.S. remains the largest and softest target for terrorism. An open and mobile society—with porous borders and guarantees of freedom—is difficult to properly police. The Internet, at the same time, has become a breeding ground for terrorism and easy communication between extremist groups and individuals.

Beyond this, the U.S. seems unprepared for a possible terrorist threat. Terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction pose a “genuine threat” to U.S. security, but there is “too much ambiguity” about who would be in charge if an attack took place, according to a report issued in December by a commission to assess the nation’s vulnerability.

Growing concern about the presence of a radical Islamic network in the U.S. may well provide the wake-up call which will lead to a strengthening of the U.S. ability to defend against and respond to the new brand of terrorism which seems to have targeted it.

U.S. Is Falling Behind in the Fight Against Terrorism—Both in High-tech and Traditional Security Areas

Because we have jumped headfirst into the Information Age, we are now highly vulnerable to a new form of warfare, cyberterrorism, which has been defined as the coupling of information systems to the threat of violence to generate fear in support of a political agenda—in particular, by targeting advanced technologies deployed by potential targets. Tomorrow's terrorists will use electrons—perhaps, for example, to compromise the computer networks that control electrical distribution across North America.

The term SCADA—Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition—refers to the nerve systems that animate today's high-tech society. Regarding electricity, it's a SCADA that recognizes a sudden demand for power in New York and gins up dormant generating capacity in Canada or Ohio to fill it.

When SCADA goes wrong, the results are dramatic. In 1996, a tree branch fell and knocked out a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. transmission line in Northern California. The computers took over and sent power surging from one utility to another—the term is “cascading”—and when the overload switches finally stopped flipping, seven states and much of Canada were in darkness for two days.

If a tree branch can do that, imagine what determined, mature computer hackers could do, especially since much of the critical data they would need is—by law—free for the taking on the Internet.

Specialists point out that while no one is going to prevail against the U.S. in a conventional military conflict at any time in the foreseeable future, going to war against America's information infrastructure is an entirely different matter. SCADA, after all, is not only about electrical grids. Centralized data-control systems run the nation's natural gas and fresh-water distribution networks, its air-traffic control system, its railroads, New York City's subways. The nation's banking web is automated and Wall Street, now in thrall to computerized trading programs, is highly vulnerable to computer malevolence.

The National Security Agency (NSA), which was designed to deal with such threats, has fallen seriously behind. In a special report, *Newsweek* declares that,

During the Cold War, NSA was able to spy on the Kremlin, but the bureaucrats at the NSA were slow to see the coming of the cyberrevolution. They failed to recognize that eavesdropping on the Internet and new modes of telecommunication would require tremendous scientific breakthroughs. The old tools of the NSA—spy satellites and global listening stations to pick up broadcast transmissions and massive computers to sort and decipher them—are relatively ineffective on the new Info Highways. Digital transmissions, used for most mobile phones and soon for almost all telecommunications, are harder to intercept than the old analog signals. Whereas analog signals are transmitted in a continuous stream, digital signals are broken into small, hard-to-track packets, e-mail and telephone calls that use the Internet, and are almost impossible to intercept.

The NSA's problems have already been costly. The intelligence community's failure to predict that India would test a nuclear weapon in 1998 suggests that NSA is becoming virtually deaf, and some intelligence experts speculate that Washington has had difficulty finding its most wanted terrorist, Osama bin Laden, because Islamic extremists use European-made encrypted mobile phones.

Discovering India's nuclear plans, for example, were described as "a tough problem" by one nuclear intelligence expert, because India's nuclear weapons establishment now sends encrypted digital messages by satellite, using small dishes that bounce signals beyond the stratosphere through a system known as VSAT ("very small aperture terminal")—a two-way version of the system widely used for DirecTV.

Similarly, the North Koreans, with the help of UN funds, are said to have bought encrypted cell phones from Europe, high-speed switching gear from Britain, and up-to-date dialing service from the U.S., a system that the NSA cannot readily read.

In a study of Washington's growing intelligence gap, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh notes that,

The collapse of Communism in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, led to a revised mission for the NSA, with more focus on international terrorism and drug dealing—both highly elusive targets. The agency's budget was cut back. In the early nineties, as more nations turned to fiber optics, the NSA shut down twenty of its forty-two radio listening posts around the world. . . . The agency's overseas military personnel have been reduced by half.

John Mills, a former CIA officer who is staff director of the House Intelligence Committee, openly discussed the NSA's problems in the fall of 1998 at a luncheon meeting with a group of retired CIA officers. "Signal intelligence is in a crisis," said Mills.

We have been living in the glory days of SIGINT over the last fifty years, since World War II. Technology has been the friend of the NSA, but in the last four or five years technology has moved from being the friend to being the enemy.

Senator Robert Kerry (D-Nebraska), the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, hinted at NSA's problems in a Senate discussion of an intelligence spending bill. "The signals are becoming more complex and difficult to process," he said. "And they are becoming more encrypted." Because of the sophistication of current encryption systems of e-mail and other communications, he said, "we will find our people on the intelligence side coming back and saying,

. . . look, I know something bad happened . . . I couldn't make sense of the signal. We intercept and all we get is a buzz and background noise. We cannot interpret. We can't convert it.

Senator Kerry said that his concern was heightened by a report on the NSA filed last year by a study group that he and Senate Richard Shelby (R-Alabama), the committee's chairman, had served on together. The Senate team, known as the Technical Advisory Group (TAC), included a number of prominent outsiders—men who were in charge of research and technology for major American high-tech corporations, including George Spix of Microsoft and Dr. Lowell Wood of the Lawrence Livermore National laboratory. Their conclusions were considered devastating. "We told them that unless you totally change your intelligence-collection system you will go deaf," said one official.

The TAC group urged that the NSA immediately begin a major reorganization and start planning for the recruitment of several thousand skilled computer scientists. One of their missions would be to devise software and write information-retrieval programs that would enable the agency to make sense of the data routinely sucked up by satellite and other interception devices. "The bottom line is they've got to retool," one advisory group official said. "It will take a lot of money and effort—like starting the NSA again."

At the same time, the U.S. appears to be vulnerable in more traditional security areas as well.

Early in December it was reported that U.S. Transportation Department investigators had penetrated security so easily at major U.S. airports that some were seated comfortably aboard airliners at departure time and could have taken a free trip. The airports involved are said to be Washington's Reagan National Airport, John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, O'Hare Airport in Chicago, and airports in Miami, Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Honolulu.

The report said that the investigators found themselves able to walk into secure areas of the airports that are supposed to be open only to authorized personnel. During the tests from December 1998, the investigators successfully breached airport security on 117 of 173 attempts—a sixty-nine percent success rate.

Since weapons of mass destruction may soon fall into the hands of terrorists, if they haven't already, American vulnerability—both technical and traditional—has become a subject of increasing concern. At the present time, it seems, clever hackers, backed by rogue states, could disrupt, if not crash, the vast global communications network that is the lifeblood of the U.S. economy. This is clearly a wake-up call.

Unraveling of Settlement in Kosovo Indicates the Unrealistic Basis Upon Which U.S. Policy Was Determined

In the aftermath of NATO's intervention in Kosovo, there were some in Washington who warned that the peacekeeping and reconstruction undertaken by the U.S. and its allies was fraught with peril. Now, as we witness sniper attacks on peacekeepers, and organized ethnic cleansing of Serbs by ethnic Albanians—it is clear that good relations between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and NATO troops and UN civil authorities has come to an end, some fear that the first shots of Kosovo's next war—between the KLA and its liberators—already have been fired.

All of this makes it clear that those U.S. policymakers who launched the U.S. and NATO intervention in Kosovo may have seriously misunderstood the nature of the problem.

Christopher Layne, a visiting scholar at the University of Southern California's Center for International Studies, notes that:

The unraveling of the post-conflict settlement in Kosovo was easily foreseeable—except, of course, by the Clinton administration. The Clinton foreign policy team bears a heavy responsibility, because the looming disaster in Kosovo is the cumulative result of the serial miscalculations that have been the hallmark of its Balkan policy the past eighteen months. The fundamental problem confronting the U.S., and NATO and the UN is simple: Their postwar objectives in Kosovo and those of the KLA are wholly antithetical.

Long before the beginning of NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia, the KLA had been waging a classic guerrilla insurgency to win Kosovo's independence from Serbia. The KLA was a national liberation movement committed to attaining independence and the seizing of political power through armed force. The KLA's vision for Kosovo is not that of a democratic, multiethnic state. Instead, its goal is a Kosovo from which Serbs have been ethnically cleansed.

Professor Layne argues that:

By mishandling the termination phase of the Kosovo intervention, the U.S. and NATO created a power vacuum that the KLA filled. Notwithstanding that the UN—backed by NATO troops as peacekeepers—was supposed to set up a civil authority for the province, the KLA already has established itself as Kosovo's de facto government. The KLA not only has monopolized the levers of future political power in Kosovo, it also remains potent militarily, having blatantly refused to comply with its pledge to disarm. The Alliance and the KLA now are on a collision course. President Clinton claimed that the U.S. and its allies fought in Kosovo to establish the principle that multiethnic democracy should prevail over ethnic and religious hatred. Yet, as U.S. and NATO military officers on the ground now admit, the brutal expulsion of Kosovo's Serb population is not the result of random acts of revenge, but rather "systematic and organized."

The U.S. policy of urging the immediate reconciliation between Kosovo's Serbs and ethnic Albanians and the creation of a pluralistic society in which both groups will live peacefully together seems, at best, naive.

Thomas Patrick Melady, former U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican, Burundi and Uganda, declares that,

The U.S. Government. . . is imposing its policy of immediate reconciliation and "living together as next door neighbors." In my opinion it will not work; worse than that it will encourage more violence and instability

in Kosovo. We now need a period of recuperation and healing. . . . I speak from experience. In the early 1970s I was the U.S. Ambassador to Burundi. I witnessed firsthand the blood bath between the Hutu and Tutsi communities resulting in the deaths of more than 150,000 people. Ethnic confrontation was rooted in centuries-old alienation and animosity between the two communities. . . . I submitted to the U.S. Department of State in 1982 a plan for the separation of the two communities. I argued that it would permit healing so that eventually there could be a pluralistic society. My plan was rejected. Since then there have been two additional wars and life in Burundi remains very precarious.

Mr. Melady points out that:

The worst genocide since World War II occurred in neighboring Rwanda. Over a half-million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in 1994 in a Hutu government-sponsored genocide. And yet U.S. policy remains “immediate reconciliation, instant pluralism and living together.” . . . The policy in Kosovo should be examined. Forcing the ethnic Albanians and Serbs to live together will only energize more violence, as it has in Burundi and Rwanda.

What is particularly disturbing is the manner in which both U.S. officials and international authorities seem to have been caught off guard by the Albanians’ eagerness for revenge. The entire enterprise in Kosovo, it seems, may have been based upon false premises and the results of these miscalculations are now clear for all to see.

David Rieff, author of the book *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know*, declares that

Unpleasant as it is to contemplate, a multiethnic society cannot be built in Kosovo. The reason is simple: It is not possible to rebuild something that never really existed in the first place. Because Kosovo, unlike Bosnia, has no tradition of interethnic harmony, its Serbs will continue to flee. Furthermore, a policy that focuses merely on building a multiethnic society in Kosovo actually makes a new crisis more, rather than less, likely. For such a policy completely overlooks the extent to which nationalistic sentiment guides the ambitions of ethnic Albanians not only in Kosovo, but also in neighboring Macedonia and Albania. Unless the West reconciles itself to these sentiments—perhaps by accepting the creation of a Greater Albania—peace cannot be sustained.

While the establishment of a UN protectorate in Kosovo has, for the moment, foiled Slobodan Milosevic’s ambitions to forge a greater Serbia, it has done nothing to answer the question of what kind of relationship an independent Kosovo will have with Albania proper and Macedonia, which is between a quarter and a third ethnic Albanian. UN officials in charge of administering the province seem to have given little thought to these questions.

In David Reiff's view,

The answers for Kosovo are not obvious. Eventual reunification with Yugoslavia is almost certainly out of the question, even on extremely generous terms. If Kosovo eventually gains its independence, it will still be an economic basket case. The result would be two impoverished Albanian states in southeastern Europe, bordering a restive Albanian population in Macedonia. This would not only threaten the stability and integrity of Macedonia, but would also have a spillover effect on Greece, which is home to an estimated 800,000 Albanian immigrants. Moreover, an independent Kosovo would be perpetually subject to attacks from Serbia. Unless the West is willing simply to maintain Kosovo as a colony indefinitely (which may be what happens, despite public denials emanating from Washington) there can be only one solution with the slightest chance of success: a Greater Albania. The dangers of this solution are obvious . . . and so far Western governments have been implacably opposed to it. But they need to reconsider if they are committed to a general resolution rather than simply a doomed exercise in damage control.

Others in Washington believe that partition is the only viable strategy for the future. There are two broad choices. One is autonomy for the Kosovars, which basically means keeping Kosovo and the Albanians in Kosovo inside a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. The other alternative is to partition Kosovo, separating the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs. The Clinton administration and many in Congress have been wedded to the autonomy solution. Of the autonomy approach, Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago states:

. . . it's not going to work. It probably won't work in the short term, and it surely isn't going to work in the long term. I favor partition. The fact is that multiethnic states don't survive in Europe. If you look all over Europe in the twentieth century, what you see is lots of examples of multiethnic states breaking apart and being replaced by ethnically homogeneous states. And when they break apart, they usually break apart in a very bloody fashion. This is regrettable but true.

The Clinton administration is now faced with an almost impossible dilemma based largely on its own miscalculations. Christopher Layne puts it this way:

The president and his advisers never realized their policy was based on a fatal contradiction: It was impossible for the U.S. to align itself with the KLA without furthering the KLA's objectives of an independent Serbless Kosovo. As in Bosnia, where the administration's dream of building a peaceful multiethnic democracy has evaporated, Kosovo is a policy failure. Unlike Bosnia, however, where a fragile peace prevails, in Kosovo, the U.S. and NATO are headed for an armed showdown with those on whose behalf they intervened. The result will not be pretty. Ω