

An Unfortunate Israeli Export

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Conventional wisdom--particularly on the left--has it that the Bush administration's bull-headed unilateralism has fueled a worldwide epidemic of anti-Americanism that has undermined global cooperation. This is of a piece with the widely held view--all too common among international human rights lawyers--that Israel's systematic violation of Palestinian human rights has rightly made the Jewish state a pariah among nations. That these beliefs exaggerate the discord between America and the world and overlook the powerful interests linking Israel and America to the community of nations was vividly brought home here earlier this month at the eighth annual World Summit on Counterterrorism, attended by several hundred practitioners and academics from more than 50 nations.

Sponsored by the International Institute for Counterterrorism (ICT) at Israel's leading private institution of higher education, the Interdisciplinary Center at Herzliya, the conference featured keynote addresses by former prime minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu and Gilles de Kerchove, counterterrorism coordinator for the European Union. Israeli minister of public security Avi Dichter and U.S. ambassador James Cunningham spoke at the moving final ceremony, held by design on September 11. That the ICT conference has become one of the largest and most important gatherings of counterterrorism experts in the world is of no small significance for understanding the civilized world's response to the war waged by transnational terrorists against it.

Certainly the people gathered at Herzliya--government decision-makers and diplomats, members of the military and police, intelligence officials, and private consultants and scholars, from Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Iraq (yes Iraq!), Japan, Jordan, Nigeria, Peru, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, South America, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and more--seemed not to have gotten the message that working with the United States and Israel is disreputable or contrary to international norms. Despite the varied interests that divide them, these states and all others share a powerful interest in fighting terrorists--those who, to take a narrow definition, aim to subvert internationally recognized governments by targeting noncombatants.

And no country has acquired greater experience in fighting terrorism under law than Israel. In the State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2007, the discussion of the terrorist threats faced by Israel is almost twice as long as the discussion of those faced by any other state, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Indeed, since its birth 60 years ago, Israel has never known a day in which its government, its military and internal security services, and its civilian population did not have to protect the nation from terrorists determined to

destroy it. The country's round-the-clock efforts to combat Hamas terror emanating from Gaza and the West Bank, and the multiplicity of threats presented by the Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah in Lebanon have made Israel a laboratory for testing counterterrorism methods.

To assure its survival, Israel has been compelled to develop expertise in acquiring and analyzing intelligence; in detaining, interrogating, and prosecuting terrorists; and in capturing and killing--in refugee camps, in towns and cities, on open terrain, and across borders--a ruthless enemy that utterly rejects the constraints that international law imposes on warfare. At the same time, to vindicate its liberal and democratic principles, Israel has sought in the fight against terrorism to respect the liberties of its citizens and the human rights of its enemies.

So the civilized nations of the world have much to gain from Israel's hard-won counterterrorism know-how. And Israel has much to gain from the friendships formed in sharing it. This was well understood by the ICT's co-founder and executive director, Boaz Ganor (this year my colleague at the Hoover Institution as the Koret distinguished visiting fellow). Established in 1996, the ICT--which offers a B.A. concentration, an M.A. program, and executive education--brings together scholars and senior figures from Israel's security community. The annual international conference reflects the same commitment to synthesizing the insights of thinkers and doers.

At this year's conference, plenary sessions dealt with the evolving threats of international terrorism, strategic and operational challenges, and future trends. Workshops addressed, among other matters, state conflicts and nonstate actors, terrorism in Europe, terrorism in Israel, terrorism in Latin America, terrorism in Lebanon, global jihad in Africa, the radical Islamic media, terrorist threats to water supplies, terrorist threats to aviation, counterterrorism policing, and the prosecution of terrorists.

While it would go too far to report that the conference achieved a clear consensus, the lectures, panel discussions, and between-sessions schmoozing did furnish ample support for several general conclusions.

First, notwithstanding the Bush administration's success in protecting the United States from terrorist attacks since September 11 and Israel's success in putting down the vicious waves of suicide bombers that Yasser Arafat unleashed in September 2000, the United States and Israel as well as countries around the world are increasingly vulnerable to catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks.

Second, the terrorists have not only mastered the use of the Internet to disseminate their message, recruit fighters, and communicate among themselves. They have also shown great skill in manipulating Western media to take their point of view while also establishing their own broadcasting companies such as Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV and Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV.

Accordingly, civilized nations must find ways to disrupt and shut down terrorists' exploitation of the Internet and traditional media, and to counter terrorists' success in using the Western press to promulgate their propaganda.

Third, the fight against transnational terrorism--which already involves unprecedented cooperation among nations--requires a great deal more pooling of resources and sharing of knowledge: As Ganor likes to say, "It takes a network to beat a network."

Fourth, to weaken the forces of radicalization at home, civilized nations must address Islamic communities' real grievances, provide educational and economic opportunities, reach out to reformers within Islam, ensure that the rule of law and the democratic ideal are extended and upheld in all segments of their own societies, and, where possible, work to fortify liberty and democracy abroad.

Fifth--and the key to all the others--the West must summon the political will to maintain focus over the long haul to prevail in a struggle that could last a generation or more and in which the enemy can lie low for months or even years on end and then, thanks to ever more lethal, ever less expensive, and ever more mobile weapons of mass destruction, strike suddenly with devastating impact.

These conclusions suggest that terrorism ought to be a topic of intense concern to the world's sole superpower as it hits the home stretch of a critical presidential election. Yet neither candidate has candidly discussed the threats to the homeland. Nor has the press, preoccupied with defending the nation against a Palin vice presidency, sought to hold the candidates accountable.

Perhaps next year's World Summit on Counterterrorism could devote a session or two to the need to educate politicians, the press, and the public about the impressive work that is already being done, and the urgent and enormous challenge that remains, in the battle against transnational terrorism.

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