



Homeland Security - Installment V - Global Risk of Terrorism

Ten years after the 9-11 tragedy, the threat of terrorism continues to evolve both in the U.S. and abroad. This podcast will address the increased focus on commercial targets by terrorist groups, provide a global survey of the growing number of terrorist events directed both at the U.S. homeland and key economic centers around the globe such as Africa, East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Latin America.

Please join us for the fifth installment of the Homeland Security series as Brian D. Finlay shares his perspective on current threats from al-Qaeda and the threat assessment in key regions around the globe. Brian is a Senior Associate and Director of Stimson's Managing Across Boundaries Program at the Henry L. Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. He currently works on issues of weapons proliferation, illicit trade networks, economic development, and private sector engagement.

Brian, what is the current threat from Al Qaeda, and what is the state of global terrorism?

Well al-Qaeda certainly has remained the preeminent terrorist threat to the United States throughout the course of 2011, and it is likely to persist as well into 2012. Though the al-Qaeda core in Pakistan has become weaker, it has retained the capacity to conduct regular and transnational attacks. Perhaps more concerning is that the al-Qaeda affiliates have also grown stronger around the world. Al-Qaeda senior leadership continued to call for strikes on the U.S. homeland even after the death of Osama Bin Laden as well as arranged plots targeted at Europe. The diversity of these efforts really demonstrated the fusion of interests in the sharing of capabilities across many al-Qaeda groups with different geographical focuses.

For instance, the Pakistan Taliban provided support to U.S. citizen Faisal Shahzad who as you will recall sought to carry out a car bombing in Times Square last May. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continued to demonstrate its growing ambitions as well, and a strong desire to carry out attacks outside of its own region and actively sought to do so. You will recall the group followed up its Christmas day attempt to destroy an air liner bound for Detroit back in 2009 with a subsequent attempt about a year later in October 2010 with its effort to blow up several U.S. bound airplanes by shipping bombs that were intended to detonate while in the planes' cargo holds.

In the Middle East, the wave of non-violent democratic demonstrations that began to sweep the Arab world, the so called Arab spring at the end of 2010, really held promise but also foreshadowed some significant peril. Great numbers of citizens advanced peaceful demands for change without reference to al-Qaeda's incendiary world view to anti-Americanism. It's quite an astounding development, but at the same time the political turmoil distracted security officials in the region and raised the possibility that terrorist groups would exploit the new openness in many of these countries, and in some cases the disarray to carry out conspiracies, and it certainly is a possibility, with significant and worrisome implications for states undergoing democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia and elsewhere. Regrettably, the apparent blow

suffered by al-Qaeda has had no significant affect on other terrorist groups in the region. Across the Middle East, Hamas for instance, continued to play a destabilizing role in the regions and remained well financed in an acute danger to both the U.S. and U.S. interests in the region.

Perhaps however, the most important and worrisome trend that we are seeing is as a result of our successful counter terrorism strategies, especially since 9-11. We've seen a shift away from large scale catastrophic attacks attempted by these terrorist organizations to a greater number of smaller and potentially more successful attacks that are aimed not at critical infrastructure or formal state structures, embassies, U.S. forces, but rather aimed at so-called softer, private and commercial targets and this is a long-term trend that policy makers, counter-terrorism experts, and I think industries should be preparing for.

Terrorism has very different regional characteristics and implications for American security around the world. It might be helpful for our listeners to have a threat assessment in several key regions of investment. Can you start in Africa?

I think Africa is certainly an appropriate part of the world to begin this discussion. Many of us underestimate the growing terrorist threat that is being presented in that particular region and there is an al-Qaeda threat certainly, but it is also matched by an array of affiliated and unaffiliated terrorist threats from groups linked and completely separate from al-Qaeda.

For instance, the Somalia based al-Shabab, which is certainly in the news today, continued to conduct frequent attacks on government, military, and civilian targets inside of Somalia while the group's leadership has remained actively interested in attacking regional U.S. and western interests outside of the borders of Somalia. For instance, al-Shabab claimed responsibility for carrying out twin suicide bombings in Kampala, Uganda that was responsible for killing 76 people last year and it underscores the increased terrorist threat in East Africa due to al-Shabab's demonstrated capability to conduct bombings not only inside, but also outside of Somalia.

Despite their tactical withdraw from Mogadishu this year, their operations in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda continue threatening wider regional destabilization and poses an extremely significant threat to security in the East African region. The Trans-Sahara al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, so called AQIM, continued kidnap for ransom operations of Western Europeans and Africans. AQIM conducted small scale ambushes and attacks on security forces in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Regional efforts to contain and marginalize the terrorist group continued, but inter religious conflict in Nigeria, for instance, continued throughout northern Nigeria with hundreds of casualties while indigenous terrorism attacks increased and continued with bombings across the country.

All in all, the sub-Saharan Africa is a growing concern for the counter-terrorism community, especially as U.S. commercial interests in Africa grow, making both U.S. interests and U.S. citizens much more vulnerable to terrorism in the region. Almost no country in the region is immune. In Burundi for instance, since 2009 al-Shabab, has threatened repeatedly and publicly to attack the government and interests in the region in retaliation for that government's participation in the African union mission in Somalia.

In Kenya, there is a serious situation unfolding as Nairobi has been targeted as of late by terrorist operations from al-Shabab. Threats emanating from Nigeria come into focus following the December 25th, 2009 unsuccessful attempt by a Nigerian national to detonate that explosive aboard a U.S. flight over Detroit, but unfortunately it is not the only incident. A year later, on

September 7, 2010, a terrorist group stormed a prison in Nigeria freeing over 700 prisoners, including 100 of its own sect members, killing seven guards and by-standers. In late December, violent extremists detonated explosives killing 32 people and wounding many others in Nigeria. So, again the terrorism threat is growing at quite an alarming pace across sub-Saharan Africa and it should be an area of great concern for both industry as well as for the United States government.

Much of our focus on Europe at the moment is centered on the debt crisis engulfing the Eurozone, but what about the enduring threat of terrorism in Europe?

Well, European countries remained a clear focus of terrorist plots in 2011. It was a year marked by several attempted attacks by violent extremists in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Non-religious violent extremist groups also remained extremely active. Non al-Qaeda branches of anarchists, for instance, in Greece repeatedly targeted government offices, foreign missions, and various symbols of the state in both Greece, as well as in other European capitals.

Long active radical nationalist groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as the PKK in Turkey, continued their campaign of violence as well throughout the course of the year. Concerns about potential terrorist activities also prompted countries ranging from the UK to Germany to raise their terrorism threat alert levels at various times during the year. Much as we experienced here in the United States, I think it's a trend that is likely to continue in 2012. And of course, outside of the U.S. homeland, al-Qaeda itself remains keenly interested in conducting successful terrorist operations across Western Europe.

A disturbing trend that we are also witnessing in the United States as well as Europe is the growth of so-called lone terrorists such as the man who attacked the Norwegian youth retreat killing a great number of individuals while also successfully detonating a bomb near the prime minister's office in downtown Oslo.

In short, I think while the capability to manage the threats in Europe is perhaps greatest because of their long and regrettable history of terrorism in the region. This trend of smaller scale and of lone terrorist attacks is likely to continue and, therefore, I think in 2012 we are unfortunately going to see an increased number of casualties, as well as increased damage across many countries of Europe as a result of terrorism.

How has the Arab Spring impacted the state of terrorism in the Middle East and in North Africa?

Despite the Arab Spring, the near east region remained one of the most active in terms of terrorist activity in 2011; a long-term trend, certainly. Multiple terrorist organizations displayed the capability as well as the intent to strike at targets across the region. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, perhaps the most threatening of all, posed an increased risk to stability within Yemen, as well as demonstrating a new intent to strike at the United States. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, despite diminished leadership and capabilities, continued to conduct attacks across Iraq. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, again, AQIM, conducted attacks, as I mentioned, against Algerian government targets, as well as undertook an array of kidnappings elsewhere to extort ransoms. Hezbollah in Lebanon continued to pose a significant threat to the stability of that country, as well as to the broader region. In Israel's Palestinian territories several groups maintain the capability to launch attacks and acquired sophisticated weaponry from outside of the country to do so.

As I mentioned, the Arab Spring was certainly remarkable for its lack of anti-Americanism. Not one U.S. flag was burned. Not one embassy was stormed or was attacked and this was quite a remarkable turnaround, an entirely internally directed revolt of democrats within each of these countries. But ironically, the strong men who once ruled these countries, be it Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, were no fans of al-Qaeda and so their ouster and the chaos that has ensued in some of these countries as a result represents an opening for terrorists and terrorist activity to flourish. So the Arab Spring was really a mixed blessing and remains so. It's unclear whether the terrorist threat, as a result of the Arab Spring, will grow or will be ameliorated by a wave of democratic activity across the Middle East.

Both South Asia and Central Asia are regions of growing interest for U.S. investors, even in the midst of the global financial crisis. What is the state of terrorist play there?

Well, South Asia continued to experience violence in 2011 as terrorists expanded their operations and networks across the region and beyond. In response, the United States increased counter terrorism cooperation with its partners in South Asia, the Pakistani government, as well as the Indian government and of course through U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, remained a critical front. Portions of Pakistani territory remain a safe haven for extremists including high-level al-Qaeda leaders. We know, of course, that Osama bin Laden was found and killed in Pakistan in 2011. Other senior leaders of al-Qaeda were captured subsequently again in Pakistani territory.

We also know that terrorist groups have used western Pakistan to plan attacks against American interests in Afghanistan. The Pakistan Taliban, the so-called TTP, continued using Pakistan's tribal belt to plan attacks against the government of Pakistan, as well as its citizens who have been increasingly victimized by terrorist operations in the region. Moreover, we know that the TTP diversified its target set as well by seeking to attack the U.S. directly as demonstrated by its support for the attempted Times Square bombing in May of 2010, for instance. Other parts of Pakistan remain significant terrorists entities located across virtually the entire country which pose a threat to stability not only for Pakistan, but also for neighboring countries and, indeed, the world.

In advance of the end of U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan, that country also has experienced a more aggressive and active Taliban led insurgency over the course of 2011 and they received support from affiliated extremist organizations such as the Haqqani Network. These groups increased their use of improvised explosive devices and coordinated attacks using multiple suicide bombs particularly in eastern and southern portions of the country while the leadership remained in hiding in safe havens in Pakistan.

India also continued to be severely impacted by terrorism in 2011 and is likely to remain a key target into 2012 as well. Though there were no attacks on the scale of the 2008 Mumbai assault, Mumbai was again the target of a series of coordinated bomb explosions at different locations across the city in July of 2011. And this of course not only targeted Indian government and cultural locations, but also had a significant impact on U.S. interests in the region. In short, I think the attack in India underlined the fact that India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan continue to remain extremely dangerous parts of the world.

Brian, how about in the Western Hemisphere and also the U.S. homeland itself?

Terrorist attacks within the Western Hemisphere in 2011 were committed primarily by two U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations in Colombia: the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the FARC, as well as the National Liberation Army, and other radical leftist Andean groups elsewhere noted for carrying out very small scale attacks. Nothing really on the scale in the Western Hemisphere, the sort of violence that we witnessed in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Of course, Mexican drug cartels are a growing challenge not only within Mexico but also increasingly and regrettably outside of the borders of Mexico as well. But all in all, the threat of a transnational terrorist attack remained low for most countries in the Western Hemisphere. There were no known operational cells of either al-Qaeda or Hezbollah related groups in the hemisphere that were actively operating, although ideological sympathizers in South America and in the Caribbean continued to provide financial and moral support to these and other terrorist groups in the Middle East and in South Asia.

Here in the U.S., thankfully, the U.S. homeland remained largely free of successful attacks in 2011. Now, that doesn't mean that attacks were not attempted, but essentially that a good mixture of intelligence, of police work, and frankly a little bit of luck prevented major death or widespread destruction in 2011. With that said, the rise of home grown terrorism that we have witnessed over the course of the past few years, certainly the death of Osama Bin Laden and the competition that has been created among the al-Qaeda affiliates to succeed al-Qaeda central, as well as the growth of lone terrorists that are operating in isolation and are extremely difficult for intelligence officials and police to identify and prevent attacks, are disturbing trends that I think create equally disturbing portents for the future.

In short, I think that while we have remained extremely fortunate in 2011 to avoid any sort of large scale attack on the U.S. homeland, U.S. officials, police officers, intelligence, as well as private industry really need to remain vigilant over the course of 2012 as we know that the United States does remain target number one for many of these transnational terrorist groups.

Brian, thank you for sharing your expertise on this very timely and complex topic.

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