

U.S. Considers Slugging It Out With International Terrorism

Aides Split on Whether to Target Groups or States That Sponsor Them

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By David B. Ottaway
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Clinton administration, increasingly frustrated in its efforts to thwart terrorism in the Middle East, is considering a more activist policy that could include preemptive strikes and expanded covert counter-terror operations, according to senior U.S. officials.

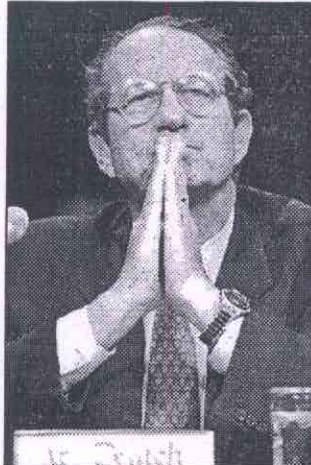
But U.S. strategists are divided over whether terror-sanctioning states or independent terrorist groups should be the primary targets of more aggressive U.S. action. Officials also disagree over whether military action—an option fraught with potential problems—would prove more effective than traditional diplomatic tools such as sanctions and boycotts against governments the State Department considers terrorism sponsors.

Some U.S. officials contend that the main threat now comes from a murky network of home-grown, privately financed and largely independent groups forming a kind of international “terrorists’ Internet,” in the words of one expert. That network is proving extremely difficult for U.S. intelligence agencies to locate and penetrate, let alone effectively counter.

“The problem is getting worse faster than we’re getting better,” former CIA director James Woolsey Jr. said in an interview. “In relative terms, I’m not convinced we’re gaining ground and we may well be losing a bit.”

The debate over how to combat terrorism comes amid charges from Republican presidential candidate Robert J. Dole and his party that the Clinton administration has been too soft on Middle East state sponsors of terrorism.

Republicans also have charged that the administration has treated leaders of those countries



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

“There will be no guaranteed safe havens anywhere in the world.”

—CIA Director John Deutch

“with undue respect,” an apparent reference to President Clinton’s efforts to win support for the Middle East peace process from Syrian President Hafez Assad despite indications that his country hosts terrorist groups.

In this atmosphere, administration officials have discussed taking more aggressive action against terrorists and their sponsors. But given the risks involved in any military action, the likelihood of conducting preemptive strikes or an extensive covert operation before the Nov. 5 election is considered remote. Moreover, not all officials share Woolsey’s sentiment

that the terror threat is worsening.

But CIA Director John Deutch said last month in a speech at Georgetown University that the CIA was drawing up a list of military options to present to Clinton “to act against terrorist groups directly either to prevent them from carrying out operations or to retaliate against groups we know are responsible for operations.”

“There will be no guaranteed safe havens anywhere in the world,” he said.

One example of “safe havens” that might be targeted are camps inside Afghanistan where Arab and other Islamic extremists have been receiving training in bomb-making and other terrorist techniques, another senior administration official said. Mir Aimal Kansi, the Pakistani fugitive wanted for the murder of two CIA employees outside the agency’s headquarters in 1993, is reported to have taken refuge in one of these camps.

Yet given the limited U.S. intelligence on these shadowy groups, the difficulties of carrying out a successful military strike against one of their camps inside a Middle East country appear enormous. Moreover, the administration’s own officials remain divided over the next steps in the war on terrorism.

It is not just Republicans who have questioned the administration’s effectiveness in dealing with foreign terrorism. The Pentagon’s own recent report on the June 25 truck bomb outside the U.S. military compound in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, cited a long list of bureaucratic and intelligence failings in the U.S. counter-terrorism program.

Ret. Gen. Wayne A. Downing, who led the investigation, emphasized the U.S. intelligence commu-

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nity's inability to penetrate terrorist groups.

"We still have enormous difficulty in gaining firsthand, inside knowledge of terrorist plans and activities," the report said.

At his Sept. 16 press conference, Downing seemed to support Republican allegations that U.S. penetration of the groups is being hampered by the CIA's new guidelines aimed at excluding use of serious human rights violators as agents. These restrictions, he said, "hamper the efforts of national intelligence agencies."

Whether the Clinton administration has been too soft on terrorism sponsors as Republicans charge, it is clear its approach and policies have varied greatly—as have the results. The State Department has designated five Middle East countries as such sponsors: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Sudan.

The administration has alternately adopted policies of containment, pressure and dialogue—or a mixture of the three—depending on the diplomatic needs of the moment, the willingness of U.S. allies to cooperate and the other issues at stake in relations with those countries.

While a combination of U.N. sanctions and military pressure has largely succeeded in curbing the terrorist activities of Libya and Iraq, U.S. efforts to curtail Iran's involvement through economic boycotts and joint allied Western pressure have failed, according to the State Department.

Iran remains "the premier state sponsor of international terrorism and is deeply involved in the planning and execution of terrorist acts," said the State Department's 1996 report on "Patterns of Global Terrorism."

Syria, however, continues to be treated gingerly by Washington although it serves as a safe haven for nearly a dozen Palestinian, Turkish and Lebanese opposition groups that "engage in international terrorism," the report said. Islamic extremists also operate training camps in Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley.

In addition, Assad permits Damascus to be used as an operations base for Iranian agents who recruit Egyptian and other Islamic militants for terrorist training in Iran, according to sources close to Egyptian intelligence.

Administration officials say their lenient policy toward Syria is dictated by the larger U.S. diplomatic objective of winning Assad's support for the Arab-Israeli peace process.

In Sudan, the administration has wielded both the stick of strict U.N. sanctions and the carrot of better relations with Washington in an effort to get President Omar Bashir to stop Islamic extremists from using his country as a haven and staging center. The other U.S. demand is that Khartoum hand over three Egyptian dissidents wanted in connection with the June 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

U.S. pressure so far has resulted in the expulsion of some extremists and closing of some camps. But skeptical U.S. officials characterize those gestures as "cosmetic" or "tactical," taken to avoid further U.N. sanctions.

Egyptian authorities say the Bashir government has simply reorganized the "closed camps" into smaller, mobile centers to avoid detection by overhead U.S. reconnaissance satellites. "Despite the PR campaign they've been launching lately," Osama Baz, Mubarak's national security adviser, said in an interview, "they are still receiving terrorists, or potential terrorists, arming them and providing them with forged travel documents."

U.S. officials are divided over whether state sponsorship of terrorism remains the main challenge in curbing modern-day terrorist activities.

Some officials argue that actions taken against rogue states still can make a significant difference. They cite the crackdown on activities of Middle East terrorists by formerly Communist countries in East Europe such as Bulgaria since the end of the Cold War and the expulsion by the Bosnian government—under enormous U.S. pressure—of most Islamic extremists from Bosnia.

They also argue that the Palestine Liberation Organization has changed under U.S. and Israeli prodding from supporting terrorism to actively seeking to curb Islamic extremist activities.

Former CIA director Woolsey contends, as do many administration officials, that if the United States could deal "effectively" with Iran and Syria, "the problem [of terrorism] would go from being an extremely serious one to being an occasional one. . . . It wouldn't go away, but it would be considerably more manageable."

Other analysts disagree. Philip C. Wilcox, who heads the State Department's counter-terrorism office, contends that "the role of states in promoting terrorism is in sharp decline."

Some Pentagon analysts agree the main problem now is the increasing number of fragmented and freelancing Islamic extremist groups supported by private sources. "Whereas 10 to 15 years ago, we had a large number of state-sponsored groups and state spon-

sorship was relatively easy to discern, in today's environment we have far fewer state-sponsored groups," one Pentagon official said.

For example, the Saudis have concluded that the four Saudi Islamic extremists executed for killing seven people, including five Americans, in a car-bomb explosion in Riyadh last November were not part of a larger Islamic extremist group, but rather carried out the operation on their own, influenced by militant Islamic teachers.

"Today's terrorists don't have to depend that much any more on states for access to financing or the technological means," a Pentagon official noted.

Nonetheless, L. Paul Bremer III, President Ronald Reagan's top counterterrorism official at the State Department in the mid-1980s, has proposed that Washington ratchet up its pressure on states like Syria and Sudan to force a crackdown on extremist groups.

"We should just say, 'You've got 48 hours or else,'" he said. "The terrorist

camps in the Sudan, you take them out."

No country has followed a more militant policy toward terrorists than Israel. Regularly, after attacks inside its borders, Israel has bombed camps of militant anti-Israeli groups in Lebanon and sent out assassins to kill their agents. The consequences have often led to the shedding of more Israeli blood than that of terrorists.

In February 1992, Israeli helicopter gunships ambushed Abbas Musawi, leader of the militant Hezbollah faction, in southern Lebanon. A month later, a bomb exploded outside the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 28 people. Hezbollah, through the Islamic Jihad faction, claimed responsibility, saying it was in revenge for Musawi's killing.

Last January, a booby-trapped cellular telephone was used to assassinate Yehiya Ayash, the Palestinian mastermind of many terrorist attacks on Israelis. The technically sophisticated opera-

tion was widely seen to be the work of Israeli agents, although Israel never acknowledged a role.

Ayash's death led to the most lethal sequence ever of suicide bombings in Israel, by Ayash's supporters in the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Islamic Jihad. Four attacks over a nine-day period last February and March left 59 victims dead.

Israelis think "we don't have a choice" but to reply tit-for-tat to terrorist acts against them, Israeli political writer Nahum Barnea wrote after suspected Israeli agents gunned down Fathi Shiqaqi, the leader of Islamic Jihad, in Malta a year ago. "But the big question is does it work. Is it effective? Are we ready to accept the notion that retaliation will be pricey?"

Correspondents John Lancaster in Cairo and Barton Gellman and Edward Cody in Jerusalem contributed to this report.