

A Necessary War

*Unless Saddam Hussein is removed,
the war on terror will fail*

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

Could a war with Iraq compromise America's war on terrorism? It would appear that many in the foreign policy establishment believe so. Senators Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican, and Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat, certainly fear the ripple effect of striking Saddam Hussein. Both have echoed former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft's dire warning that an attack on Iraq would "jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counterterrorist campaign we have undertaken." Former secretary of state James Baker, another close adviser to Bush père, was only a little more conditional, urging the present administration to confront Iraq "in the right [multilateral] way" or risk damaging our relationships with Arab and European states and "perhaps even our top foreign policy priority, the war on terrorism." And if you spend any time with the working-level realpolitikers who staff the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, and the Pentagon, you'll quickly hit Scowcroftian resistance to a second Gulf campaign. "I think the war will screw up our liaison efforts against al Qaeda," remarked a CIA officer serving in the Near East Division of the Directorate of Operations. He agreed with Senator Hagel that "a coalition of common interest and intelligence" was the only

way to beat Osama bin Laden's holy warriors. "I don't know that many people inside [the CIA] who think the war is a good idea," he added, after giving a tour d'horizon of Arab rancor over the coming campaign against Baghdad.

But these fears for the war on terrorism are unfounded. A war against Iraq will reinforce, not weaken, whatever collective spirit has developed among intelligence and security agencies working against Islamic radicals. Indeed, without the war to remove Saddam, it is likely that the counterterrorist efforts of "allied" intelligence and security services in the Muslim world will diminish, if not end entirely. And it shouldn't be that hard to understand why. Self-interest and fear of American power, not feelings of fraternity and common purpose, are what will glue together any lasting international effort against terrorism.

Let's first look at Europe, where Mohamed Atta planned the September 11 attack. In many ways, Europe is *the* front line in the battle against holy-warrior terrorism. European assistance against al Qaeda and its friends is essential, probably much more valuable than the aid we can receive from Muslim states in the Middle East and Central Asia. After all, travel to the United States on European Union passports is easy and probably will remain so

until we get attacked by holders of E.U. passports. Without a European heads-up, it is virtually impossible to block committed al Qaeda militants like the Frenchman Zacarias Moussaoui from entering the United States or to track them after they're here. And although the Euro-

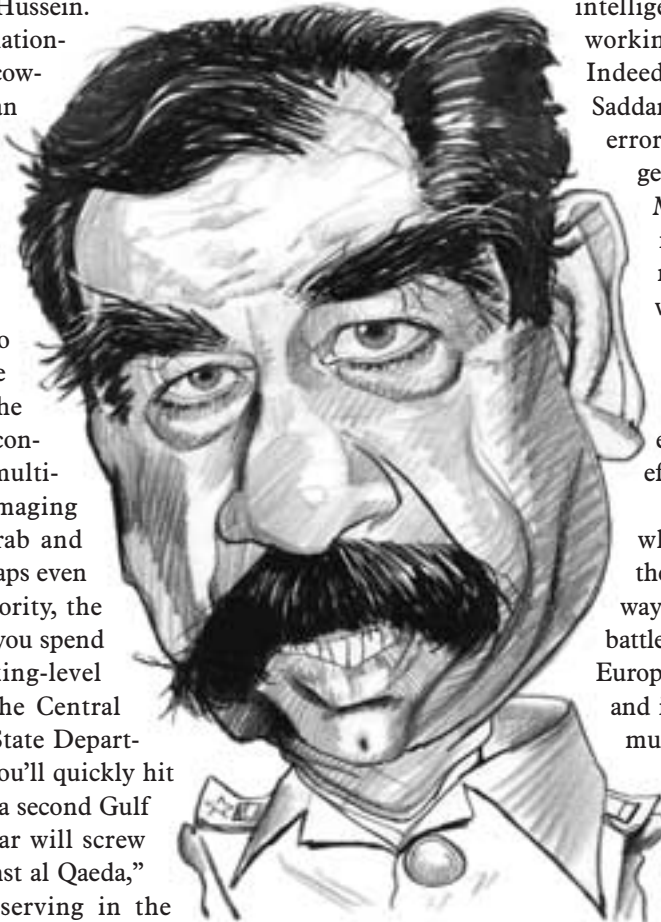


Illustration by Thomas Fluharty

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peans have generally been somewhat hesitant to embrace publicly America's "war on terrorism," and have been overtly hostile to the Bush administration's bellicosity towards Iraq, European intelligence and security services are stuck with the fact that roughly 14 to 17 million Muslims now live within the European Union (the estimate is unavoidably imprecise given the large number of illegal Muslim immigrants and the reluctance of some European states to denominate the census by religion). Though you can regularly hear a wry sigh of relief from European security types about al Qaeda's targeting preferences ("Much better the Americans than us"), they aren't professionally comfortable hoping that Islamic militants will bomb only the American half of Western civilization. Attacks on the United States in Europe are hardly a solution—al Qaeda's plan, for example, to use the former Tunisian-German soccer player Nizar Trabelsi as a kamikaze against the U.S. embassy in Paris would have killed far more Europeans than Yanks.

Islamic radical networks, in various states of organization and health, have crisscrossed Western Europe for years. If only a minuscule fraction of the growing Muslim fundamentalist population of Europe were to join bin Laden's holy warriors and aim their terrorism against their neighbors, internal-security officers would confront nightmare scenarios. In the mid-1990s, a somewhat ragtag group of militants, inspired primarily by the troubles in war-torn Algeria, the frustrations of being Muslim in France, and a violent anti-Western brand of Islamic preaching, robbed banks, bombed Paris metro stations, and tried to derail a super-fast "TGV" passenger train. Less ragtag and far more suicidal, al Qaeda could certainly do better. Which is why European security services by and large have responded with alacrity to September 11, questioning, arresting, and incarcerating hundreds of fundamentalists. With the possible exceptions of the Belgians and the Dutch, the West Europeans have reacted as vigorously as the Americans, if not more so. The French and the British, both less agitated than Americans about civil liberties in times of stress, aggressively use temporary imprisonment as an investigative counterterrorist tool. France's famous counterterrorist judge Jean-Louis Bruguière could teach Attorney General John Ashcroft and the Federal Bureau of Investigation many things about using randomness in arrests and detention to sow anxiety amongst the enemy and give the (perhaps justified) impression of effective state power.

An Anglo-American invasion of Iraq would in no way

diminish the self-defensive reflex that propelled all of the Continental Europeans to monitor their Muslim populations more closely and seek maximum cooperation from American intelligence and security agencies. European public opinion may fear the war in Iraq, European elites may loathe the moralizing, over-muscled, "unilateral" American approach to foreign policy, but European statesmen and policemen, first and foremost, want to protect their own. They know there is no neutral option in this war against terrorism; they can't make a behind-the-scenes deal with holy warriors, as some Europeans made pacts in the past with more secular Middle Eastern terrorists. The father of modern Middle Eastern terrorism, Yasser Arafat, may have converted himself into an object of European *tiers-mondiste* sympathy, but Osama bin Laden and his not-so-merry men never will.

The Europeans are cornered, and European intelligence and national security officials who handle Islamic terrorism know it. As a French internal security official remarked to me, "I often think the Americans are idiots, but being anti-American in my work makes no sense." Irrespective of any European bitterness or fury about Washington's "hubris" in the Middle East, U.S.-European intelligence cooperation against

young Muslim males who live to incinerate themselves has just begun to blossom. Indeed, it is likely that the specter of Islamic terrorism will draw Western intelligence and national security agencies closer together than did the Cold War. Ostpolitik, détente, and the fear of moles in European services often made intelligence liaison work in the past a haphazard, half-hearted affair. Imagining the luxurious Crillon Hotel, which sits across a narrow street from the U.S. embassy in Paris, as a charred ruin will likely do much more for professional fraternity between French and American cops and spooks than imagining Soviet tanks rolling over Germany ever did. Change the ruins, and ditto for the rest of the Europeans. Quite contrary to the common depiction of the Middle East as the principal fissure between America and Europe, the region, especially to the degree it embodies an Islamist threat to the United States and Europe, will likely be the one unbreakable bond between otherwise increasingly distant family members.

If only a minuscule fraction of Europe's Muslims joined bin Laden, internal-security officers would confront nightmare scenarios.

In the Middle East and Pakistan, we will see a somewhat different dynamic at work. Fear of America, not fear of bin Ladenism, is what primarily binds Wash-

ington and these friends. If the United States does not go to war against Iraq, it is most probable that the pre-9/11 status quo will return to U.S.-Middle Eastern and U.S.-Pakistani relations. Without a militant America to inspire (and worry) them, foreign liaison services will act in their rulers' best interests, which when dealing with bin Laden-esque radicalism will mean ignoring the Americans as much as possible.

The decade before September 11, 2001, is instructive. Contrary to the line taken in the United States by Saudi crown prince Abdullah's public-relations minions, bin Laden's war against America is not a war against Saudi Arabia. There is certainly no love lost between the leadership of al Qaeda and the House of Saud. Islamic radicals like bin Laden have long dreamed of the fall of the Saudi royal family and other "pro-American" and "anti-Islamic" dictatorships throughout the Middle East. The ruling regimes in Riyadh, Cairo, Algiers, Damascus, and Amman are acutely aware of the violent antipathy that certain fundamentalist movements have had for them. In the 1980s and 1990s, they all fought, and in their minds won, battles against coup-minded Islamic militants. Some of these

fighters—in Egypt and Algeria, in Mecca in '79 and in the Syrian town of Hama in '82—were ferociously ugly. The rulers in these countries have surely noted that al Qaeda's suicide bombers have not been directed at them. The Saudis have closely studied bin Laden's statements where he discourages his followers from making a battleground of Arabia, the future oil engine of bin Laden's resurrected caliphate.

Unlike the Assassins of the Middle Ages, who rarely killed Crusaders in their suicidal assault on the established Muslim order in the Middle East, bin Laden's holy warriors live to kill Americans. Arab intelligence and security services were certainly more aware than Langley of the "Arab-Afghans," like bin Laden, returning from the Soviet-Afghan war. Such men often threw themselves into nationalist Islamist struggles, notably in Algeria. Middle Eastern intelligence services could have been banging on the CIA's doors throughout the 1990s, warning it about the dangers coalescing around Osama bin Laden. Yet I haven't met or heard of a CIA or State Department officer who can recall his Arab counterparts' sounding the alarm about al Qaeda. It strongly appears that no Arab foreign



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intelligence service made a serious, sustained effort to recruit or seed agents into al Qaeda until the end of the decade, when America began to focus more seriously on bin Laden's bombers. Indeed, what in great part makes bin Ladenism special and his appeal borderless is the extent to which the Saudi holy warrior aimed his terror beyond the detested dictators and kings of the Middle East, directly at the United States. Bin Ladenism is what the hard core of Iran's Islamic revolution aspired to but never attained—a jihadist "virtual umma" (to borrow from the Franco-Iranian scholar Farhad Khosrokhavar), a nationless community of suicidal believers who can strike the "Great Satan" from any corner of the globe.

Now why in the world would the rulers of the Middle East want to tempt fate and provoke al Qaeda and its followers to aim closer to home? Compared with the terrorist-guerrilla units that sprang from the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, the old-time Islamic Jihad in Egypt, or the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, al Qaeda's globe-trotting warriors are a blessing for Muslim rulers wanting to sleep at night. The only consistently compelling reason for Hosni Mubarak, for example, or any other Muslim ruler in the Middle East to extend himself continuously and aggressively against al Qaeda is fear of American power.

The Pakistani example is illuminating. In 2001, after the September 11 attacks, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, who had consistently backed the Taliban regime in Kandahar, the protector of al Qaeda. General Musharraf had also been one of the primary architects of the practice of using Afghanistan for training Islamic militants for the guerrilla-cum-terrorist war in India-controlled Kashmir. These training camps, supervised by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, were interconnected and co-located with some of the training programs funded and organized by al Qaeda. With Powell's visit, General Musharraf quickly understood America's resolve, abandoned the Taliban, fired some pro-Taliban army and ISI officers, and confronted Islamists within Pakistan whom he'd once backed. Now it is open to doubt whether Islamabad has permanently retired from playing the fundamentalist card among the Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan, but Musharraf and his fellow military officers will certainly be wary of resuming past habits so long as they believe Washington is looking over their shoulder and retains the will and capacity to punish them painfully.

Look at Saudi Arabia for a lesson in reverse. In 1996, when terrorists blew up a U.S. military barracks at Kho-

bar Towers in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 servicemen, the ultra-conservative and anti-American Saudi interior ministry under Prince Nayef shut down the FBI's investigation. FBI director Louis Freeh, and by extension President Clinton, looked weak in Saudi eyes for allowing Nayef to set the rules. This was an egregious example of kowtowing, one of many over the years that have encouraged Saudis to believe they can have the upper hand in U.S.-Saudi relations. So why should the Saudis—who have spent decades developing international missionary networks that encourage a virulently anti-American Islamic gospel—forthrightly aid Washington in dismantling the Saudi-funded Wahhabi organizations that have done so much to draw recruits into Islamic militancy and into al Qaeda?

Has any Bush administration official flown to Riyadh to instruct Crown Prince Abdullah in the tenuous nature of power, as Secretary Powell did with Musharraf? Has anyone from the CIA, the FBI, or the State Department demanded to review in detail the Saudi intelligence and security files on the myriad institutions, some state-supported and some not, which spread Saudi money and Wahhabism around the world? Seeking a "coalition of common interest and intelligence" with the Saudis on radical Islamic fundamentalism is a surreal endeavor. Reversing the lesson of Khobar, however, is more doable. Just ask the small Gulf sheikhdoms how the Saudis conduct power politics. Washington should do unto Riyadh as it does unto others. Whatever our intelligence take is from the Saudis—and Saudi intelligence was in the best position of any Arab service to penetrate al Qaeda before its bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa, attack on the USS *Cole*, and 9/11—adherence to this "golden rule" could only make the relationship better. It couldn't make it worse.

However Washington conducts itself toward individual Arab states, it should be obvious that if the Bush administration now fails to go to war against Saddam Hussein, we will lose enormous face throughout the region. President Bush has defined himself and America by his axis-of-evil, regime-change policy toward Iraq. Without a successful war to remove Saddam, we will return to the pre-9/11 pattern of timidity that Osama bin Laden so effectively underscored in his writings and speeches. In the eyes of the young men who live with the purpose and promise conferred by the hope of martyrdom, we will have shown that Osama was right—that indeed we are no longer "the strongest horse." And these young men will, sooner rather than later, brutally reveal to us that an attempt to prosecute a "global counterterrorist campaign" in the absence of awe at American power is bound to fail. ♦