

THE (NOT SO) UNTOUCHABLES

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In January 2005, President Bush used his second inaugural address to reaffirm America's commitment to an ambitious strategy built around the worldwide spread of democratic principles. "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands," Bush told the assembled crowd that day. "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."¹

Though he did not say so on that occasion, a central element of the struggle outlined by the President is the issue of corruption. There is an intimate connection between criminality and terrorism. Terrorism does not operate in a vacuum. It finds sustenance from regimes that support or tolerate it. Those regimes, in turn, tend to be despotic in nature, and more often than not degenerate into criminality.

These connections are part and parcel of the contemporary terror threat. Where a drug trafficking network exists, a WMD smuggling ring potentially does as well. Organizations that smuggle immigrants into the United States can easily do so with terrorist operatives. Syndicates that launder money earned from drug sales can make those funds available for a terrorist safe house. Corrupt regimes, meanwhile, have the capacity to sustain and profit from these activities. The possibilities are endless.



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Deadly collusion

The boundaries between today's criminal and terrorist worlds are fluid. Criminal groups can evolve into terrorist organizations, and vice versa. As intelligence analyst Jason Freier outlined recently in these pages, there are three main patterns of criminal/terrorist interface:

1. *Alliances for mutual benefit*, in which terrorists enter agreements with transnational criminals solely to gain funding, without compromising their ideology;
2. *Direct involvement* of terror groups in organized crime, removing the middleman but maintaining the ideological premise of their strategy; and
3. *Replacement of ideology* with profit as the main motive for operation.

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Of the first variety, perhaps the best-known case is that of the world's preeminent arms dealer, Viktor Bout. A former Soviet air force officer, Bout has built a clandestine arms trafficking empire over the past decade-and-a-half, violating numerous international arms embargoes and aiding multiple genocides in Africa in the process. During the 1990s, as a major supplier to Liberian dictator Charles Taylor, among other sordid clients, the Bout syndicate took diamond concessions in exchange for supplying weapons in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars. Subsequently, Bout moved his operations to the United Arab Emirates, and found another theater in which to peddle his wares. Initially, his cartel provided arms and technology to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, until one of his planes was intercepted by the feeble Taliban Air Force—an opportunity he parlayed into the cultivation of a business partnership with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.²

A similar case of criminal/terrorist partnership, this one much closer to home, involves the El Salvadorian gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13). Since its start as a vigilante group in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, MS-13 has grown into a ruthless nationwide criminal syndicate, one widely known for its trafficking in weapons and persons. Today, MS-13 is thought to operate in 145 law enforcement jurisdictions across 31 states.³ And increasingly, it appears to have drifted toward an operational relationship with the al-Qaeda network. In September 2004, the *Washington Times* reported that a key al-Qaeda lieutenant, Adnan Shukrijumah, had made contact with the gang in Central America.⁴ Since then, unconfirmed rumors of an al-Qaeda/MS-13 union have persisted—fueled by the group's trans-

national reach and its penchant for illicit smuggling activities.

Evidence of the second pattern—that of direct terrorist involvement in criminality—likewise abounds. Al-Qaeda operative Ahmed Ressam, following his arrest on the U.S.-Canadian border in December 1999, revealed that members of the Bin Laden terror network engage in theft and fraud as a means of funding operations or sustaining cell operations. Lebanon's Hezbollah has long been known to be involved in the global narcotics trade, using revenue from the cultivation of poppy in the Beka'a Valley to fuel its activities. Colombia's FARC similarly cultivates narcotics in order to fund its military and political operations. And the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines is notorious for bankrolling its activities through kidnapping and extortion.

Finally, terrorist groups can and do devolve into criminal concerns. The Revolutionary Armed Force of Colombia (FARC), which began as a Marxist guerrilla outfit dedicated to violent political change, now resembles nothing so much as an organized drug-running operation. Over time, the FARC leadership traded in its ideological fervor for expensive cars and palatial haciendas. The FARC today has devolved into a drug cartel that happens to maintain an army, and which uses the entrée into Colombian politics provided by its Marxist ideology to acquire and retain power.

Gangster governance

Authoritarian regimes embody criminality of a different sort. Though they may differ vastly in political orientation and ethnic composition, states where certain actors, or even whole classes, are placed above the law all share a common character-

istic: corruption. And because of the unaccountable nature of these regimes, they are less constrained from colluding with terrorist elements or rogue states.

The contemporary scandal over the abuse and mismanagement of the United Nations Oil-for-Food program provides a clear example of such unaccountable state behavior. Investigations have found that Syria, a leading state sponsor of terrorism, assisted the regime of Saddam Hussein in the illicit procurement of military material and other contraband items. This trade, in turn, both sustained and armed Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party. "Syria was Iraq's primary conduit for illicit imports from late 2000 until OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom]," the CIA's Iraq Survey Group concluded in its 2004 final report. "Most of Iraq's military imports transited Syria by several trading companies, including some headed by high-ranking Syrian government officials, who competed for business with Iraq."⁵

Another case in point is the official thuggery of the Kim Jong-il regime in North Korea. In April 2003, the Australian navy apprehended the North Korean vessel *Pong Su*, uncovering \$50 million worth of pure heroin intended for sale in Southeast Asia. Lest there be any doubt about the officially sanctioned nature of this drug trade, an official of the Korean Workers Party was detained during the raid.⁶ One month later, a North Korean defector testified before the Senate Government Affairs Committee that the DPRK has been in the narcotics business since the late 1980s.⁷ More recently, North Korea has been implicated in counterfeiting and distributing U.S. \$100 dollar bills, also known as "supernotes."⁸

Perhaps the best illustration, however, is the case of Hezbollah. The

radical Shi'ite militia, created and sustained by Iran, complements its subsidies from Tehran with profits from the drug trade. For their part, Iran's ayatollahs aid and abet this criminal conduct. The willingness of the Iranian regime to sanction this criminal activity—indeed, to empower it—is a testament to the corrupt, authoritarian character of their rule.

Before his untimely death at unknown hands in Moscow's gangland, *Forbes Russia* editor Paul Klebnikov eloquently outlined this corrupt political economy. "Iran has other lethal secrets besides its nuclear program, now the subject of prying international eyes," Klebnikov wrote. "Dozens of interviews with businessmen, merchants, economists and former ministers and other top government officials reveal a picture of a dictatorship run by a shadow government that—the U.S. State Department suspects—finances terrorist groups abroad through a shadow foreign policy. Its economy is dominated by shadow business empires and its power is protected by a shadow army of enforcers."⁹

Beyond "stability"

So far, American strategic thinking has been slow to account for these trends. For more than six decades, U.S. national security policy has been focused above all on the preservation of "stability." Over the years, this elusive quest has translated into unfortunate support for a bevy of corrupt governments, from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to that of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines.

During the Cold War, such a policy certainly made sense; the overarching threat of a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and USSR made preserving stability a valid primary concern. But the end of the Cold

War ushered in a new period—one in which the bipolar U.S.-Soviet contest degenerated into fierce power struggles between states no longer restrained by their respective superpower patrons. A host of tyrannical regimes, which had been tolerated or even supported by the U.S. in its efforts to ward off Soviet ideology, suddenly found themselves free to consolidate power.

Yet, by and large, the Soviet collapse did not prompt a foreign policy rethink in Washington. In the name of stability, the U.S. during the 1990s sought a different sort of balance—one aimed predominantly at "containing" two of the Middle East's most menacing rogues, Iran and Iraq.

The faulty logic of this paradigm was tragically brought into focus on September 11th. Over the preceding decade, away from American attention, the terrorist threat had matured, fueled by the perception that the U.S., while able, was unwilling to enforce its vision of a benign world order. For Islamic radicals in the Middle East, this hesitance was seen as a sign of provocative weakness.

To its enduring credit, the Bush administration is now moving beyond this failed notion. In its September 2002 *National Security Strategy*, the White House declared its commitment to "the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property."¹⁰ Since then, President Bush has been even more explicit. In his March 2005 address to the National Defense University, the President outlined the start of a new approach toward repressive states:

By now it should be clear that decades of excusing and accommodating tyranny, in the pursuit of stability, have only led to injustice and instability and tragedy. It should be clear that the advance of democracy leads to peace, because governments that respect the rights of their people also respect the rights of their neighbors. It should be clear that the best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance and hope kindled in free societies. And our duty is now clear: For the sake of our long-term security, all free nations must stand with the forces of democracy and justice that have begun to transform the Middle East.¹¹

This formulation recognizes a fundamental truism. Meaningful democratic reforms create a climate that is hostile to both terrorists and the criminal class. More importantly, they directly challenge the entrenched elites of a regime intent on retaining power.

To be sure, democratization will not quell the repressive instincts of politicians who prefer ruling to governing. But it will limit their options, and ultimately make them accountable for their actions. It also will not prevent bad ideas from being discussed or entertained, but it will allow good ones to gain traction. Such change, moreover, is not beyond reach.

Next steps

For the United States, success in the War on Terror hinges on a more expansive vision of the terrorist threat. Today's terrorists do not operate in isolation. They interact with—and are supported by—a network of criminal syndicates and corrupt regimes. Confronting this sinister symbiosis requires forcing foreign governments and non-state actors alike to confront the fundamental

choice outlined by President Bush in the dark days after September 11th: “If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers, themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril.”¹²

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- *Designating criminal groups as foreign terrorist organizations.* The worlds of terrorism and organized crime are remarkably similar, and their intended goals are complementary. Criminal cartels such as the arms network of Viktor Bout can and do cooperate with terrorist groups, and by doing so expand the harm that those groups can do the United States and American interests. Designation of such criminal syndicates as terrorist actors in their own right under U.S. law would send a powerful signal to the enablers of global terror that their activities are no longer immune from retribution. As a practical matter, it would also increase the economic and political tools available to American policymakers in shutting down the criminal/terrorist connection.
- *Getting tough with criminal regimes.* More and more, Washington is beginning to grapple with the fact that many of its international partners, particularly in the greater Middle East, are deeply deficient in the very political criteria that have emerged as

the centerpiece of U.S. strategy. Of late, the Bush administration has begun to push for greater pluralism and accountability in places such as Egypt and Uzbekistan (albeit with varying results). Unaddressed so far, though, are governments in that region and elsewhere who actively export their corruption through the perpetuation of criminal activities abroad. The list of culprits includes not only Iran and Syria, but regimes like that of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro in Cuba. These actors must be given a clear signal: if they persist in such conduct, they themselves will be treated as state sponsors of terrorism.

All politics is ultimately local, and proper counterterrorism strategy begins at home. But four-and-a-half years after September 11th, the United States national security decision-making structure remains archaic and poorly suited to dealing with contemporary “multi-vector” threats.

- *Revamping the domestic response.* All politics is ultimately local, and proper counterterrorism strategy begins at home. But four-and-a-half years after September 11th, the United States national security decision-making structure remains archaic and poorly suited to dealing with contemporary “multi-vector” threats. In order to properly address today's terrorist challenge, the United States must make blending law enforcement, military and intelligence capa-

bilities a top priority. A good first step in this direction would be the creation of a dedicated directorate for organized crime at the National Security Council tasked with handling the delicate interface between various—and often competing—federal agencies in the consolidated War on Terrorism and international crime.

- *Refashioning foreign aid.* For far too long, American foreign aid has been perceived by its recipients to be a “free lunch.” As scholar Yuval Levin lays out in his important study on the subject, “American aid to the Middle East is a tragedy of good intentions on a grand scale.” “The stated purposes of aid—the service of American interests, the support of allies, and the establishment of peace—are sound, reasonable, and just,” Levin recounts. “And yet, in the Middle East aid has proven to be counterproductive and even dangerous for the United States and for its closest ally in the region: Israel.”¹³

Today, good governance may be a key element of the Bush administration's counterterrorism strategy, but reform of foreign aid has lagged far behind. With the notable exception of the Millennium Challenge Account established by President Bush in March 2002, U.S. foreign aid is still by and large not subjected to performance-based criteria. The results, not surprisingly, have been distinctly counterproductive to U.S. policy. A new take on foreign aid allocation is needed—one that conditions American assistance on transparency in recipient governments, and fos-

ters the eradication of the corrupt and criminal regimes that sustain the global terrorist threat.

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Strategic democratization

Democratic reforms are not instant or easy. Nor are they necessarily permanent. If not closely guarded, democratic gains can be reversed, as they were in Colombia in 1994, when the notorious Cali cartel bought the election of Ernesto Samper, touching off a series of events that sullied Colombia's international reputation and ensconced a threat to domestic stability that endures to this day.¹⁴ Colombia should serve as a cautionary tale. As long as the nexus between terrorism and organized crime exists, free nations will be imperiled by it.

To those that seek it, President Bush has sent an unambiguous message: freedom is a universal value. It is also a principle whose promotion makes sound strategic sense. Severing the connection between terrorist groups, organized crime and corrupt regimes is a very good place to start.



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