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Focus on Syria and Ukraine Shows Al-Qaida Lost

By Radek Sikorski

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On Sept. 11, 2001, at 3 p.m., Warsaw time, I was talking on the telephone with Poland's consul general in New York. She informed me that two planes had hit the World Trade Center. That moment, I realized, was more than just a plane crash. The United States, the world, indeed our very lives, were about to change fundamentally.

Ten years later, it is clear that the fanatics behind those attacks miscalculated in two central respects. They regarded Western democracies as weak — unwilling or unable to respond to their evil extremism. And they expected Muslim communities and countries around the world to rise up and mobilize behind their millenarian worldview.

But, far from being uncertain or indecisive, the democratic world responded with unrelenting determination to terrorist outrages of all shapes and sizes. Across Europe and in America, new arrangements have been set up to pool information about possible terrorist attacks and take the speedy (and sometimes robust) action needed to prevent or disrupt them. Where possible,

we work closely with India, Russia, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf states, and other key international partners.

The institutions and policies established by the European Union are a vivid example of the unobtrusive benefits of modern cross-border integration. EU member states share highly sensitive intelligence and police information as never before, thereby increasing public security while upholding world-class legal and democratic standards. These operational measures have been complemented by carefully calibrated policies that aim to acknowledge social diversity but reduce the political space available for intolerance and bigotry.

Success does not come easy. Most of al-Qaida's leaders are dead, but our democracies rightly experience impassioned debates about means and ends, and about the balance between individual freedom and state authority. In the current difficult global economic climate, public concerns about immigration and access to jobs inevitably grow more acute, increasing the risk that rival forms of lumpen populism and associated tensions will emerge.

Above all, the West's effective crackdown on domestic extremism has tended to drive would-be terrorists — now often based in remote parts of the world, where they hope to operate with impunity — to higher levels of technical sophistication. As a result, painful policy dilemmas arise, and they can divide even the closest allies. How best to respond if some states cannot or will not take the necessary steps to thwart terrorist planning on their territory? How to deal with evidence of terrorist planning gleaned from states suspected of practicing torture?

The sheer nihilistic irrationality of terrorism strains and tests our own beliefs like nothing else can. Yet the terrorist blows inflicted on New York, London and Madrid over the past decade have not shaken Western democracies. Our societies are more resilient, open and diverse than ever.

That said, we are not simply destined to succeed. Even well-intentioned social policies can have unwelcome consequences. Above all, we should be grateful to the police forces and intelligence agencies whose unflagging hard work and dedication far away from the public eye help keep us safe.

The 9/11 terrorists' second blunder was to believe that their terrorist attacks would inspire an irresistible surge in anti-Western Islamist extremism. In some parts of the world, radicalization of this sort did take place. Yet, since 9/11, most victims of Islamist-inspired terrorist extremism — often in the vile form of suicide attacks — have been Muslims, in Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere. Terrorist groups have to resort to organized crime to fund themselves.

In short, far from leading some sort of worldwide Islamist revolution, the violent fanaticism of al-Qaida and other organizations now resembles a repulsive, but manageable, form of ideological toxic waste. And the focus this year has shifted decisively away from it. Millions of people in North Africa and the Middle East have started to demand a normal society with basic democratic rights and, above all, rule of law. They welcome measured and respectful U.S., European and wider support.

Faced with this unexpected challenge, some desperate rulers, above all now in Syria, have been using repressive, even terrorist methods against their own people. European pressure on

President Bashar Assad's regime is intensifying. In Libya, Colonel Moammar Gadhafi's appalling tyranny has collapsed; the EU will be generous in helping the Libyan people start to build a modern pluralist society. Poland's initiative to create a European Endowment for Democracy could play a leading role here, and with Europe's own unfinished business of democratization in Belarus and elsewhere, like backsliding Ukraine.

Few people decide to commit terrorist outrages. Of those who do, a minute fraction actually try to carry them out, and only a tiny number of those succeed.

But the main lesson of 9/11 is that in any free society a tiny number of people can exploit their freedom and do vast damage, especially when the underlying motivation is incoherent. This is exemplified in very different ways by the murderous killing spree in Norway in July, and now by WikiLeaks' disgraceful release of huge numbers of unredacted diplomatic cables.

The terrorism threat 10 years from now will probably be even more diverse and unpredictable. In Europe various homegrown "single issue" extremist groups need close monitoring. In each case, we see obsessive people arrogating to themselves the right to decide others' fate, and using modern technology for their harmful purposes. By its very nature, this sort of disaggregated but highly focused threat is almost impossible to identify and intercept in advance.

Of course, the democratic world cannot build a bombproof house. But we can minimize risk by remaining vigilant and upholding at all times the values on which our societies are based.

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