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Europe's First Institutional Responses to the September 11th Attacks[†]

With one US Congressman labeling the recent terrorist attacks against the US a “catastrophic failure of US intelligence” and another Senator “a failure of great dimension” it is clear that changes will probably be made to the way in which the US goes about its national security business. But given the in excess of 350 arrests or detentions to date that have been executed in half a dozen countries in connection to the Sept. 11th attacks in New York and Washington, it is also clear that the network of operators that implemented the hijackings was an international one which operated not only in the United States but also in several states of the European Union. What is less clear at the moment is how coordinated and effective the international police and security service response to the atrocities will be. Recent events have afforded a glimpse at the possible responses.

At the moment there are two preeminent international inter-governmental law enforcement structures. The European Union states have EUROPOL, but before there was EUROPOL there was INTERPOL. Quite coincidentally the latter world organization had its 70th Annual Congress just 13 days after the attack. The event was a first for several reasons, including that this was the first official meeting of an international law enforcement organization following the tragic events and that it was the first time that INTERPOL met in a country which had previously been Communist and had in fact harbored terrorists during the Cold War (for example Carlos the Jackal). The following is an assessment of its action taken to date and plans INTERPOL aired at the Budapest meeting.

Whilst the name INTERPOL is widely known, its history and functions are not. Based currently in Lyon, France, INTERPOL is the successor to the International Commission of Criminal Police Authorities (CIPC) created in 1923. INTERPOL currently operates with a budget of just under 50 million EUROS and a staff of just under 400 officers (the vast majority of whom are seconded from 54 of its member states). Its tasks have been divided up until the September attacks into 10 functional “baskets.” The most important ones were: -enhancing international relations between authorities, - acting as a message-forwarding service between services as well as the issuer of “Red Notices” (for example in relation to terrorists-at-large); and serving national authorities with analyses (for example on organized crime operations such as under INTERPOL's Project Millennium). If the pronouncements of the organization's leaders in Budapest are anything to go by then this rather modest collection of tasks will be radically redrawn and the mandate of the institution altered to reflect the new threat as represented by the attacks.

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The 5-day event passed in total twelve resolutions committing the organization to new actions or reforms. Of greatest relevance to the immediate issues at hand is the creation of a 11th September Task Force to be established at INTERPOL HQ in Lyon. The measure announced by Secretary General Ronald Noble will be used to coordinate international criminal police intelligence related to the US attacks. Upon collation and processing, the intelligence will be routed to INTERPOL's DC Bureau and the FBI. Nevertheless, as with any new tool, there will be costs involved. As a result, the organization managed in Budapest to radically reform its own financing structures, with far greater burden being placed on the wealthier of the 179 member-states and with the introduction of a debt-amnesty with regard to the poorer nations (this will allow 31 members to return to full status. Given that many terrorists have in the past been recruited from indigent nations, this reform could prove most useful). Additionally the decision was taken finally to initiate meaningful cooperative relations with EUROPOL. In the past there was competition and even bad-blood between the two overlapping organizations for obvious territorial and prestige reasons. As founded by the EU's Maastricht Treaty, EUROPOL also has an intelligence collating function related to the fight against terrorism, the trafficking of fissile materials and organized crime. But EUROPOL has almost the same size staff as INTERPOL which means that it has a far greater capacity to generate original intelligence analysis pertaining to the much smaller geographical area it is mandated to cover. Additionally in only 9 years of operating, EUROPOL has succeeded where INTERPOL has failed in the almost 70 years of its existence. Already there are fully mandated investigative EUROPOL teams operating in the field assisting national authorities in their investigations.

Speaking to the board members at the Budapest Congress it is clear that there is now a strong desire not only to work with EUROPOL but to emulate it especially with regard to operational capability. As INTERPOL's Vice-President for Europe and Director General of the UK's National Criminal Intelligence Service, John Abbott made clear that: "Information is our Life-blood. We need to be well-organised and global in scope as a direct result of the level of organisation and global reach evinced by today's perpetrators. I hope for a far greater sharing of operational information after the events of September 11th. Intelligence relevant to law enforcement work must be forwarded in a timely fashion. It is of no value sitting on a desk when it is needed by another agency." Informally the hope is that INTERPOL, following the setting-up of the Sept 11th Task Force, will be able to launch field teams to gather intelligence on the ground, for example in the countries that unwittingly provided the safe houses to active terrorist cells or lone terrorist operators, such as Germany Belgium and the UK. But already the tensions between what has to be done and the existing legal framework are apparent. Nevertheless the expectation amongst the law enforcement professional present was that many national parties to INTERPOL will have to reassess the balance between civil liberties and the provision of adequate law enforcement tools to be used in the course of investigating and hopefully preventing future terrorist attacks.

Regarding the immediate task at hand, INTERPOL has not been too slack here either. The organization has already posted a Red Notice for Aiman Al Zaahri , leader of Al Jihad and alleged right-hand-man to Osama bin Laden. Additionally the Budapest meeting allowed key players to make commitments to increase the shared ability of



European nations to trace the “paper trail” of terrorist financing all this happening just prior to the actions taken by the UK and others to freeze millions of dollars worth of assets supposedly connected to bin Laden and his followers.

Whilst it was probably planned some time in advance, given the latest reports of bin Laden related extremists regrouping in the UCK-controlled areas of Kosovo and Presovo, many potential terrorist-target INTERPOL states welcomed that fact that last week saw Yugoslavia invited to re-join the fold and accede to the organization. If these reports are well-grounded and if cooperation with the extensive law enforcement and intelligence assets in Belgrade can be ramped up rapidly, then Europe will have a wholly new channel through which to take the fight to an area of great training, financial and logistic importance to Muslim extremists and related drug-trafficking organizations.

In conclusion, it seems feasible that changes will soon be made to INTERPOL and the way anti-terrorism is internationally managed. This will be all the more apparent if some of the blame for the intelligence failure regarding the attacks is shunted from the US to the shoulders of some of those European nations in which al Qaeda allegedly operates. Although a European or global equivalent of the FBI is highly unlikely it is reasonable to surmise that: new operational investigation teams will be mandated in the near future; INTERPOL will generate a serious intelligence analysis arm of its own; and that the cooperation between national authorities and other international bodies – such as EUROPOL – will increase significantly.

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