

Liaisons Dangereuses? Transatlantic Intelligence Cooperation and the Global War on Terrorism

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Introduction

Although many “traditional” terrorist organizations have operated across borders – e.g., the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) on the European mainland, Lebanese Hizbollah in Latin America – none approaches the truly transnational operational reach of the al-Qa’ida networks, whose cells have metastasized throughout the global South, as well as in Europe and (possibly) North America. This multinational, indeed global, presence dictates a counterterrorism that is equally transnational in nature. For all its economic power and military prowess, the United States has no monopoly on counterterrorism capabilities. European special forces are key elements in the worldwide “manhunt” for so-called “high-value targets; intergovernmental bodies like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) help combat terrorist financing; and the Organization of American States Inter-American Conference on Terrorism (CICTE) has helped enhance border control, aviation security, and anti-terrorism legislation. And although the United States spends an estimated \$44 billion a year on intelligence,¹ it relies extensively on other countries to provide critical operational information and other forms of assistance. Intelligence collaboration is nothing new, to be sure. During the Cold War, formal multinational arrangements as well as bilateral relationships between US intelligence services and their foreign counterparts were integral parts of the West’s struggle against the Soviet Union. The attacks of 11 September 2001 added a heightened sense of urgency to intelligence cooperation between the United States and its traditional allies, and have led the Americans to forge a new anti-terrorism coalition and establish new relationships with regimes that before 9/11 were considered “untouchable” by Washington policymakers.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it will provide a broad overview of international intelligence cooperation, a phenomenon also known as intelligence “liaison.” Second, it will discuss key aspects of post-9/11 intelligence collaboration in

[†] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the RAND Corporation or its sponsors.

¹ Stephen Losey, “Intelligence Budget is \$44 Billion,” *Federal Times*, 8 November 2005, <http://federaltimes.com/index2.php?S=1227613>, accessed 27 April 2006.

the “global war on terrorism.” Finally, the paper will explore some of the challenges to intelligence cooperation since the attacks of 11 September 2001. But first, several caveats are in order. Although the focus of this paper is on transatlantic cooperation, the global nature of the campaign, and the range of countries with which the United States has intelligence ties, the discussion will also consider aspects of US intelligence cooperation with other regions, e.g., the Arab world. Second, this paper is US-centric, which is perhaps inevitable, given the staggering size and global reach of the 15-member US intelligence community. Finally, this paper focuses exclusively on post-9/11 counterterrorism collaboration between *civilian* intelligence services, and so does not consider the important issue of cooperation between US and foreign *military* intelligence, nor will it explore the related (and overlapping) issue of law enforcement cooperation.²

Why cooperate?

International intelligence sharing, notes one former director general of Britain’s Security Service, “is something of an oxymoron,” since intelligence services (perhaps more than any other arm of government) embody “individual state power and national self interest.”³ The core mission of an intelligence service is, after all, to protect the interests of the state. Spies are by nature doubters and sceptics. Intelligence is acquired a great expense, and sometimes a great risk, and sharing such treasure does not come naturally. Sharing requires a willingness to reveal one’s weaknesses, since “you are telling someone else what you and know and inferentially, at least to the initiated, what you don’t know.”⁴ This reluctance to share secrets is not confined to dealing with foreign services. In the United States, the vast intelligence community has frequently found it difficult to share with *itself*.⁵ This has sometimes had tragic consequences, as demonstrated by the pre-9/11 failure of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to exchange vital information about the 9/11 hijackers.

But international cooperation clearly does occur, and in the case of the United States and Britain, for example, exchanges have been routine since the late 1930s. Simply stated, intelligence services share information because they perceive it to be in their interest to do so. Such collaboration is not an end unto itself. Spies recognize that

² For a discussion of international police cooperation against terrorism, see Nora Bensahel, “A Coalition of Coalitions: International Cooperation Against Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29 (2006), pp. 38-40; and Kristin Archick, “US-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism,” CRS [Congressional Research Service] *Report for Congress*, 24 January 2006, pp. 3-6.

³ Stephen Lander, “International Intelligence Cooperation: An Inside Perspective,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3 (October 2004), p. 481.

⁴ A. Denis Clift, “Through the Prism of National Security: The Challenge of Intelligence Sharing,” *Defense Intelligence Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2002), p. 98.

⁵ Michael Smith, “Intelligence-Sharing Failures Hamper War on Terrorism,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, July 2005, p. 24.

no state has a monopoly on intelligence.⁶ The enduring UKUSA agreement – a largely Anglophone signals intelligence (SIGINT) collection club – pools resources and thereby enables SIGINT collection on a global basis.⁷ But such multilateral sharing is the exception rather than the rule, and is typically done to serve broader, non-intelligence purposes, such as bolstering alliance solidarity.⁸ Intelligence officers prefer to deal with foreign services on a bilateral basis, which *inter alia* allows for greater control over how and to whom shared information is disseminated. In the case of human intelligence (HUMINT), developing one’s own “unilateral” capabilities is time consuming; in the case of technical intelligence, it is both time consuming and very expensive. “Piggybacking” on a foreign service through “liaison” relationships can help overcome shortfalls in language skills and cultural awareness, reduce the risks associated with collection activities, and instil habits of cooperation that can improve joint operations.⁹

However, liaison relationships, even with a close, long-standing ally, can impose risks and costs on one or both parties. Although counterintelligence is typically less of concern between allies, both sides must nonetheless be alert to the possibility that even old friends spy on each other from time to time, as demonstrated in the case of Jonathan Jay Pollard, a US Navy intelligence analyst convicted of spying for Israel.¹⁰ Intelligence cooperation with unsavoury regimes with miserable human rights records, if made public, can generate domestic and international political controversy.¹¹ During the mid-1990s, for example, revelations that the CIA station in Guatemala kept local military and intelligence officials accused of torture and murder on the agency’s payroll emerged as a full-blown Washington scandal. Finally, a country’s heavy reliance on what the CIA terms “liaison reporting” can lead make that nation vulnerable if its partner fails to collect or pass along essential intelligence information. Canada, fearing a dangerous dependency on US intelligence, is reportedly seeing greater unilateral collection capabilities.¹²

⁶ Lander, “International Intelligence Cooperation,” p. 491.

⁷ For more on the workings of the UKUSA system, see James Bamford, *Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency from the Cold War Through the Dawn of a New Century* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 40, 394-405; and Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The Ties That Bind: Intelligence Cooperation Between the UK/USA Countries* (London: Routledge, 1990). The system also reportedly includes so-called “third party” members, such as Norway, Turkey, and South Korea. Jeffrey T. Richelson, *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (2nd ed), Ballinger, 1989, p. 283.

⁸ Jennifer E. Sims, “Foreign Intelligence Liaison: Devils, Deals, and Details,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, vol. 19 (2006), p. 202.

⁹ Sims, “Foreign Intelligence Liaison,” p. 203.

¹⁰ For more on the Pollard case, see Wolf Blitzer, *Territory of Lies: The Exclusive Story of Jonathan Jay Pollard: The American Who Spied on His Country for Israel and How He Was Betrayed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

¹¹ R. Jeffrey Smith, “Deutch Cites Concerns on CIA Failings; Human Rights Issues In Guatemala Noted,” *Washington Post*, 22 June 1995, p. A15. For another example of potential fallout from such relationships, see Rahul Bedi, “The Assassins and Drug Dealers Now Helping US Intelligence,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), 26 September 2001, p. 10; and

¹² Sims, “Foreign Intelligence Liaison,” p. 199.

Liaison relationships are pay-as-you-go propositions, and no nation is given a free ride on anything but a temporary basis. But such collaboration does not always require repayment for information in kind.¹³ Sometimes real estate useful for collection purposes is bartered for economic subsidies or outright cash payments. From the 1960s until the early 1990s, Fidel Castro allowed the Moscow to operate a major SIGINT installation in Lourdes, Cuba in exchange for cut-rate petroleum and other blandishments.¹⁴ More recently, the CIA reportedly arranged for the son of Indonesia's intelligence chief to attend the National War College in Washington to encourage robust Indonesian cooperation in the global war on terror.¹⁵

Liaison and the "Long War"

Given the transnational character of the jihadi nebula, all states are vulnerable, at least theoretically. This borderless threat has proven to be extremely elusive, opportunistic, and operationally adaptive, as demonstrated by the ability of the network's autonomous cells to carry out major post-9/11 attacks in London, Madrid, Istanbul, Casablanca, Jakarta, and other major cities. Preventing future attacks, dismantling support structures, and disrupting the terrorist recruitment process require an intelligence-driven approach. As the global war on terror evolves into the "long war" – Washington's new term of art that is intended to reflect more accurately the protracted nature of the campaign against al-Qa'ida¹⁶ – intelligence will remain at the forefront of the coalition's strategy.

International cooperation is and will remain an important element of the intelligence component of the campaign. Collaboration on counterterrorism did not begin after 9/11. Most of the successful operations against al-Qa'ida before 9/11 were the result of "joint initiatives" involving US and foreign intelligence services.¹⁷ The CIA's pre-9/11 strategy against al-Qa'ida, known as "The Plan," relied heavily on liaison services to gather HUMINT and make arrests. As George Tenet, the director of central intelligence, told congressional investigators in 2002, "[w]e worked with numerous European governments, such as the Italians, Germans, French, and British to

¹³ According to Lander, intelligence cooperation

¹⁴ For more see William Rosenau, "A Deafening Silence: U.S. Government Policy and the SIGINT Facility at Lourdes," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 1994).

¹⁵ Julian Borger, "CIA Bought Cooperation Against Terrorism, Says Report," *Guardian* (London), 19 November 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5337119-110340,00.html,m> accessed 18 April 2006.

¹⁶ Bradley Graham, "Abazaid Credited With Popularizing the Term 'Long War,'" *Washington Post*, 3 February 2006, p. A08; and Simon Tisdall, "Washington Digs in for 'Long War' as Rumsfeld Issues Global Call to Arms," *Guardian* (London), 7 February 2006, p. 16.

¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, *Joint Inquiry Into Intelligence Community Activities Before and After the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, December 2002), p. 92.

identify and shatter terrorist groups and plans against American and local interests in Europe.”¹⁸ Indeed, Congressional investigators sharply criticized the CIA for its pre-9/11 reliance on liaison HUMINT reporting and its failure to mount unilateral collection operations.¹⁹

Since 9/11, liaison relationships between the United States and foreign services have increased in number and, in the case of pre-existing partnerships, have grown deeper. “Contacts have been increased and there is more cooperation in all areas,” the director of Spain’s National Intelligence Centre, Jorge Dezcallar, told reporters in 2002.²⁰ Actions taken by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (*Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst*, or AIVD) helped thwart an attack on the US embassy shortly after 9/11.²¹ German-American intelligence sharing on terrorism, which began during the 1960s, remains robust.²² Cooperation between US and French services is particularly close,²³ belying the claim that there is a vast rift between Washington and Paris. A symbol of this cooperation is Alliance Base, a secret counterterrorist intelligence center located in the French capital. According to published reports, Alliance Base, headed by a French general assigned to France’s external intelligence service, the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure* (DGSE), is staffed by intelligence officers from Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United States. The center does more than exchange intelligence – it is a forum for operational collaboration that “analyzes the transnational movement of terrorist suspects and develops operations to catch or spy on them.”²⁴

In counterterrorism cooperation, as with other aspects of intelligence liaison, the services of the countries involved perceive such collaboration to be in their self-interest. Liaison relationships allow each partner to draw on the comparative advantage of the other. America’s liaison partners can draw on the US intelligence community’s incomparable technical intelligence, as well as the US government’s financial wherewithal. For countries with difficult or hostile relations with the United States, “adversarial liaison” offers the opportunity to improve ties with Washington or even, as

¹⁸ George J. Tenet, “Written Statement for the Record of the Director of Central Intelligence Before the Joint Inquiry Committee,” 17 October 2002, http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/2002/dci_testimony_10172002.html, accessed 24 April 2006.

¹⁹ US Congress, *Joint Inquiry*, p. 90.

²⁰ “Spanish Intelligence Chief Gives Newspaper Interview,” *El Pais* (Madrid), 28 April 2002, www.opensource.gov (accessed 24 April 2006).

²¹ Rob Schoof and Jos Verlaan, “AIVD Does Not Even Talk About Successful Actions,” *NRC Handelsbad* (Rotterdam), 17 November 2004, www.opensource.gov, accessed 20 April 2006.

²² Stéphane Lefebvre, “The Difficulties and Dilemmas of International Intelligence Cooperation,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 16 (2003), p. 533.

²³ Jean Guisnel, “Americans and Frenchmen Hand in Hand,” *Le Point* (Paris), 7 July 2005, www.opensource.gov, accessed 20 April 2006.

²⁴ Dana Priest, “Help from France Key in Covert Operations,” *Washington Post*, 3 July 2005, p. 1.

in the case of Syria after 9/11, reduce the possibility of American coercion.²⁵ What does Washington gain in exchange? Cooperation with the intelligence services of Arab and Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Pakistan gives US intelligence agencies (and by extension, their policymaking “customers”) access to human intelligence that it would be difficult or impossible to acquire unilaterally. These countries, as well as former colonial powers such as France, have comparative advantages derived from geography, history, economic ties, and “socio-cultural affinity,” and it makes sense for the United States to rely on others.²⁶

Liaison partners can also offer Washington insights into critical areas that the US intelligence community has neglected. For example, a number of European services have looked carefully at the issue of terrorist recruitment—a process that is vital to understand if the United States wants to move beyond simply capturing and killing “high-value targets.” Curiously, the US government has only just begun to address the issue of recruitment. American policymakers would do well to consider the work of the AIVD, which has done very impressive work on the subject, most notably in its 2002 report, *Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands: From Incident to Trend*.²⁷ For obvious reasons, the study focuses on jihadi recruitment in its Dutch context, and so at first would appear to have little wider relevance. But such a view is mistaken for two reasons. First, given the transnational nature of the threat, what happens in the European “field of jihad,” is likely to have implications for US security. Second, there is every reason to believe that the recruitment process described in the study (involving mosques and Islamic centers, jihadi veterans, and indoctrination and isolation) is in fact a more universal phenomenon.²⁸

Liaisons dangereuses?

Intelligence cooperation across the Atlantic is likely to remain an enduring feature of the international campaign against al-Qa’ida and the broader jihadi nebula. As argued above, such collaboration serves operational and collection purposes, and can contribute to broader political goals. That said, we cannot take continued cooperation for granted, and we must remain alert to factors that could erode the “happy habits” of liaison between the United States and its European allies.²⁹ Three areas merit particular attention:

²⁵ Sims, “Foreign Intelligence Liaison,” p. 200.

²⁶ Martin Rudner, “Hunters and Gatherers: The Intelligence Coalition Against Islamic Terrorism,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, vol. 17 (2004), p. 216.

²⁷ AIVD, *Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands: From Incident to Trend* (Leidschendam, The Netherlands: AIVD, 3 December 2002).

²⁸ William Rosenau, “Al Qaeda Recruitment in the United States: A Preliminary Assessment,” in MIPT [Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism] *Yearbook 2004* (Oklahoma City: MIPT, 2005), pp. 23-34.

²⁹ The phrase is from Lander, “International Intelligence Cooperation,” p. 487.

Transatlantic misperceptions

Robert Kagan's now-famous observation that "Americans are from Mars, and Europeans are from Venus" is an amusing exaggeration, but it contains a kernel of truth.³⁰ With respect to the jihadi threat, each side of the Atlantic believes that the other conceptualizes the problem in different and essentially irreconcilable ways. Europeans, according to the US cliché, are allergic to the use of force, preferring instead to take a weak-sister, feel-good approach that addresses the supposed "root causes" of terrorism, such as discrimination, economic and social deprivation, and the lack of educational opportunities. The European cliché posits the United States as a brutish "hyperpower" that sees military force as the primary tool for countering the jihadi threat. In fact, both sides are wrong. The Europeans, as demonstrated in Afghanistan and elsewhere, are hardly pacifists, and Washington's growing insistence that countering al-Qa'ida's ideology is crucial to dissolving the ideational glue that binds the international jihadi movement together suggests that the Bush administration is moving beyond a purely "kinetic" response to terrorism.³¹ But such misperceptions, if allowed to spread, can have a corrosive impact on transatlantic relations at all levels, including the realm of intelligence liaison.

Political and other differences

Continuing conflicts over political, legal, and human rights issues, if allowed to grow, could also undermine the habits of cooperation. European privacy laws – more far-reaching than anything in the United States – may limit the ability of European agencies to share information about individuals.³² Similarly, fears that intelligence could become part of a criminal prosecution could make European services unwilling to risk compromising their sources and methods by sharing with the Americans. Concern about alleged human rights abuses and other mistreatment could also impose limits on liaison relationships between European and American services. The CIA's reported rendition of two terrorist suspects from Stockholm to Egypt in December 2001 caused a major controversy in Sweden.³³ As one Swedish paper declared, "[l]egal safeguards must take precedence over friendly relations with foreign powers."³⁴ More recently, a European Parliament investigation into CIA operations on the continent criticized the

³⁰ Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, No. 113, June-July 2002, <http://www.policyreview.org/JUN02/kagan.html>, accessed 30 April 2006.

³¹ See for example "Dr. Rice Addresses War on Terror: Remarks by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice Followed by Question and Answer to the U.S. Institute of Peace," 19 August 2004, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040819-5.html>, accessed 2 December 2005.

³² Rudner, "Hunters and Gatherers," p. 212.

³³ Craig Whitlock, "New Swedish Documents Illuminate CIA Action," *Washington Post*, 21 May 2005, p. A1.

³⁴ "Question Them," *Aftonbladet* (Stockholm), 28 April 2005, www.opensource.gov, accessed 20 April 2006.

agency for kidnapping and illegally holding terror suspects on the territory of member states, conclusions that are likely to exacerbate transatlantic friction.³⁵

The one-way street

The United States regularly shares high-grade intelligence with the G5 countries (that is, Britain, France, Spain, Germany, and Italy), but appears much less willing to do so with other nations.³⁶ In the words of one European official, “[i]f you call sharing a one-way street, then we share information. [The United States] wants what we have immediately and demands it. But if we ask for something, it can take months before we even get an initial reply.”³⁷ Relationships between US intelligence and the services of non-European countries, such as those in the Arab world, are likely to be similarly one-sided, at least with respect to the most sensitive intelligence. As argued earlier, liaison is based on the belief that such arrangements serve one’s interest, so presumably even a one-way exchange of high-grade intelligence with the United States is worthwhile, provided the Americans give something of comparable value in return. That said, the United States will have to do more if it expects to maintain and expand its liaison relationships, particularly in the Arab world. According to Desmond Ball, the United States must be “much more forthcoming in sharing its intelligence, in order to both persuade Arab authorities of the validity of US indictments and to assist them in their domestic counter-terrorist activities – and in the process revealing aspects of US capabilities.”³⁸

³⁵ Dan Bilefsky, “European Inquiry Says CIA Flew 1,000 Flights in Secret,” *New York Times*, 27 April 2006.

³⁶ Michael Smith, “Intelligence-Sharing Failures,” p. 23.

³⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁸ Desmond Ball, “Desperately Seeking Bin Laden: The Intelligence Dimension of the War Against Terrorism,” in Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (London; Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 71.

Conclusion

Although some observers expect multilateral bodies like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) to assume a greater counterterrorism role, it seems unlikely that the United States will engage in any large-scale intelligence-sharing with these organizations.³⁹ Many US intelligence officials would probably agree with the EU counterterrorism coordinator, Gijs de Vries, who told the US Congress in 2004, “[m]ost of the instruments and competences in the fight against terrorism remain in the hands of the Member States.”⁴⁰ The United States has had perennial concerns about leaks, espionage, and other security lapses within multilateral bodies, but the more significant problem, is one of speed, or more properly, the lack thereof. Neither NATO nor the EU is cut out for swift action—a key shortfall in the case of operational intelligence, whose utility is often short-lived, and one that is likely to grow as these institutions expand.⁴¹

Transatlantic intelligence cooperation is therefore likely to retain its essentially bilateral nature. Although some claim that the United States has been “overcharged” by its liaison partners for the HUMINT they provide, and that the United States is dangerously dependent on other countries, intelligence cooperation on counterterrorism must be assessed as net gain for the parties involved. “The overall result,” concludes Richard J. Aldrich, “has been a mutual dependence that is healthy and that ensures a greater reservoir of unique skills in the service of Western policy.”⁴² While these ties are likely to endure, they cannot be taken for granted, and both sides of the Atlantic must continue to nurture this vital intelligence cooperation.

³⁹ Adam Townsend, “Keeping EU-US Anti-Terror Cooperation on Track,” 3 July 2003, http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/townsend_europeanvoice_jul03.html. For more on the EU and counterterrorism, see Doron Zimmermann, “The European Union and Post-9/11 Counterterrorism: A Reappraisal,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 29 (2006), pp. 123-145.

⁴⁰ Gijs de Vries, statement for the record, US House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, 14 September 2004, http://www.house.gov/international_relations/108/dev091404.htm, accessed 18 April 2006.

⁴¹ Richard J. Aldrich, “Transatlantic Intelligence and Security Cooperation,” *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 4 (2004), p. 733.

⁴² Richard J. Aldrich, “Dangerous Liaisons: Post-September 11 Intelligence Alliances,” *Harvard International Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Fall 2002), p. 54.