

Remarks by US Ambassador Ross Wilson

Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, NATO-Russia Council Centre of Excellence – Defense Against Terrorism

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Good morning. Welcome.

It is an honor for me to be an opening speaker at this Conference on Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism. I join my colleagues in welcoming this initiative by the George C. Marshall Center, the NATO-Russia Council, and Ankara's own Center of Excellence for the Defense against Terrorism.

The convergence of countries, international organizations and resources here says something important about the impact of terrorists on our world and the extent to which we have realized that an entirely new kind of inter-state collaboration will be necessary to protect, defend and advance our ways of life.

Turkey has long been a "leader," and I use that word with large and unfortunate quotation marks around it, in being faced with and dealing with large-scale terrorism. ASALA, DHKP-C, and the PKK – or Kongra-Gel or KADEK or TAK, they are all the same thing; these are among the most prominent groups whose violence here has accounted for nearly 40,000 lost lives over the past several decades.

Russia, whose presence here I particularly welcome, has also been a victim of terrorism. Al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers in the 1990s fomented terrorized and radicalized Chechnya, and they attacked beyond it in the North Caucasus and elsewhere in Russia. Budennovsk, Pervomayskoye, and the Nord-Ost theater seizure in Moscow were among barbaric acts that outraged Russia and the world.

Germany, home to the Marshall Center, is no stranger to terrorist violence. We remember the drama of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the shock we felt at the Munich Olympics terror attacks, and the La Belle Disco bombing that killed and wounded hundreds of Germans and Americans – and Turks living in Germany.

La Belle wasn't the first or most infamous attack on US interests. We recall the murder of a crippled American, Leon Klinghofer, by terrorists who seized a cruise ship in the Mediterranean; Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988; and the 1993 attempt by al-Qaeda to blow up the World Trade Center. Of course, they later succeeded, and September 11, 2001 is a date now etched in world history.

The last changed the way my country regarded international terrorism. I don't want to dwell on 9/11 or its implications. Suffice it to say that we resolved at that time to lead the international fight against al-Qaeda and to cooperate with like-minded countries to strengthen their and the international system's ability to defeat terrorism and defend our people.

Our countries and many others have resolved to work together more effectively to fight terrorism in all its manifestations. Our cooperation is fitful and incomplete; it certainly is a work in progress. We have struggled with a number of issues. Among them are the following.

First, how should nation-states deal with terrorist groups that use national boundaries and longstanding principles of state sovereignty to find sanctuary, confound territory bound authorities of law enforcement, and hinder the ability of states to provide for their national security? When a country cannot lock up known terrorists because they haven't committed in an offense in that country or against that country's nationals, and then those terrorists walk free, something probably is not working right.

Second, how should law-abiding governments deal with terrorists whose activities and ambitions do not fit our longstanding mechanisms and standards for dealing with either common murderers or combatants in wartime? Terrorists have no divisions and great corps of armies, but they are not regular criminals either. We have to develop new and more effective law enforcement tools, and we have to reconsider our ideas about the suitable use of deadly force. Both approaches raise ethical and moral issues that are not easy or simple, though they are all too easy to judge from a distance by those who have not recently felt the hot breath of frightening, indiscriminate violence.

Third, what are the underlying causes of terrorism and how should states try to deal with them? Most people would find it hard to argue against the idea that terrorist violence arises, sociologically speaking, out of poverty, despair, hopelessness and resentment. It is true that terrorist leaders seem more often than not to come from middle class backgrounds. But terrorists do not just spring forth from Medusa's head, and effective government policy will seldom just involve cutting off of terrorism's tentacles. The causes must be considered, and constructive policies must be devised to draw people away from the dead ends of violence and despair – and to allow our terrorist enemies to walk away from violence, just as we have developed means for criminals and warring armies to stop.

The first two topics are interesting and complicated ones, and they are important – and controversial – in different ways for different countries represented here and for others.

The last, I think, relates directly to this conference and its theme – how do we counter ideological support for terrorism and their causes, how do we drain the swamp from which terrorism emerges, and what role should these efforts play in our overall strategies for defeating terrorist threats to our publics and national security.

To get at these issues, I hope that in your discussions this week you can explore the key ideologies and motivators of hatred and terrorism at both the leadership level and among recruits and supporters. One sense we have, certainly in Iraq and Afghanistan, is that the drivers are different for the leaders on the one hand and supporters on the other. If you can understand these differences, it may be possible to drive a wedge between the two as once vehicle for stopping the violence and defeating those who propagate it.

There is also the broader environment. Democrats believe that citizen involvement in the affairs of government and a strong civil society are key elements for political stability and drawing people away from the political rejection that terrorism represents. That is easy for me to say – coming from a country that, despite some serious crises, has been profoundly stable for 150 years. So how does government engender or at least facilitate democratic and market participation in places that have been profoundly unstable? How does one do this without the security overkill that drives support for the extremist ideologies we are trying to defeat? This is a problem Iraq faces today. How should we consider the possibility that extremists can exploit democracy to gain power legitimately and then destroy the very democratic values we wanted to preserve?

There are social, ethnic, and religious factors to consider, as well as what government strategies are possible to change those things and make them factors for stability. You need to, and I am sure will, consider the issue of separatism, when and how ameliorating separatist aspirations might be appropriate and inappropriate, and what are effective and ineffective strategies for doing so.

At the end of the day, terrorism is about a struggle by a very small number of ideologues with unlimited aims who seek through fear to defeat a very large number of people who seek to live in peace and harmony. When those ideologues have significant support, terrorism – or revolutionary insurgency – flourishes, and peaceful civil life evaporates.

We need effective strategies to defeat the small number. We need effective strategies to divide potential followers from that small number. We need both a negative agenda, sometimes kinetic and always active, to make sure that the die-hards cannot succeed in their goal of creating havoc and fear, and we need a positive agenda to show the way of participation, prosperity and peace.

There is no single right set of answers to any of these issues. Discussions like these can help produce shared understandings, and again I commend the organizers for putting together this week's activities.

Let me close with a few observations about terrorism as a topic in US-Turkish relations.

As I remarked earlier, Turkey is one of the 20th Century's primary victims of terrorism. That the authorities here take a very hard line on terrorists is both understandable and appropriate. Despite the frightful attacks of November 2003 in Istanbul by al-Qaeda, Turkey has been heroic in supporting efforts by my country and others to shut down this deadly organization. It is a major contributor in Afghanistan to the defeat terrorism and of its ideologies through practical and hard work that involves security forces, educators, health care and attention to public wants and aspirations. To say that the world should be grateful for the strong efforts of Turkey against al-Qaeda would be a dramatic understatement.

The PKK is the most difficult specific terrorist problem that Turkey faces. It is one where none of Turkey's allies have done all they can or should. Even if I am frustrated with the slow pace of recent, demonstrable steps, I am proud of the help the United States has provided. It reflects our support to an ally in need and our contribution to defeating a terrorist and criminal menace that is bad for Turkey, bad for Europe, and bad for Iraq. We are working on a number of strategies with Turkey to squeeze the PKK, reduce its ability to raise money and operate, and strangle its presence in northern Iraq. My government is committed to this at the highest level, and I am determined that we will produce results.

The biggest part of the struggle with the PKK is ultimately, of course, Turkey's burden. It is tough, even ugly work. In recent weeks, Turkish security forces have clearly taken the battle to the PKK. The United States supports that work, and we are looking now at ways that we can further help Turkish security forces find, go after and defeat those endangering the citizenry of this country.

Turkey's work in further developing its democracy, broadening free speech and free expression, and broadening prosperity and investment to the eastern parts of the country can help counteract the PKK ideology of terror. We wish the people of Turkey every success.

The establishment of this NATO-certified Center of Excellence for the Defense Against Terrorism is a clear indicator of Turkey's strong interest in working with, learning from, and providing its insights to other allied and friendly governments. The United States applauds this collaborative strategy which I am sure will be a core element of the international effort to police our world in the 21st Century against the thugs and tyrants who would destroy our way of life.

Thank you and, again, welcome.