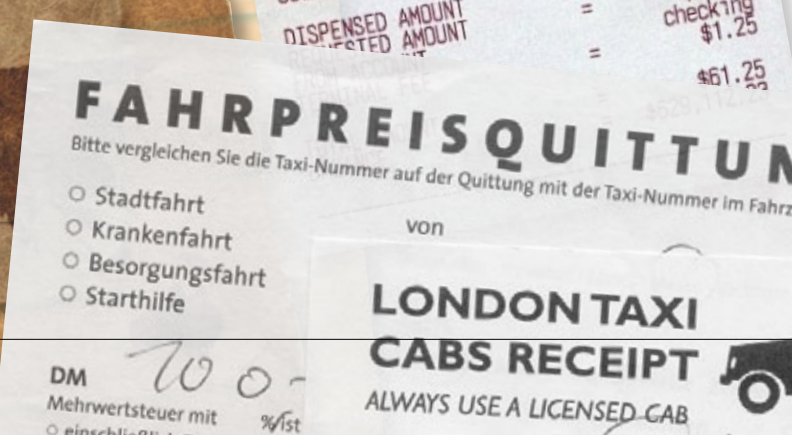


# Anti-Terror Detectives

Programs  
Share Evidence  
Collected in  
Afghanistan  
and Iraq with  
Interpol

By per Concordiam Staff





**Two groundbreaking intelligence-sharing programs are helping to identify, arrest and imprison extremists through evidence collected from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq. Projects Vennlig and Hamah were started by United States European Command to share U.S. Department of Defense information in partnership with Interpol, a consortium to which all but two countries in Europe and Central Asia belong.**

Morocco, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, Spain, France and Romania are just a few of the 90 Interpol member nations that have benefited from these programs. Phone numbers, receipts, computer passwords, cellphones, bank account numbers, maps – what the military calls “pocket litter” or “DOMEX” (Document and Media Exploitation) – are collected from detainees by coalition ground troops and shared with participating Interpol members. The programs, which have been called the “cornerstone of counterterrorism efforts,” have distributed thousands of pieces of evidence, leading to the arrest of terrorists and exposing foreign fighter networks.

Projects Vennlig and Hamah serve the same function but in different locations. Vennlig, Finnish for “friendship,” began in Iraq in 2005, whereas, Hamah, the Arab word meaning “protect,” is the name of the Afghan version of the program started in 2008. The programs exploit information seized by coalition ground troops after extremists are killed or captured. Identity cards, photographs, computer CDs, phone numbers, passports, associations, operational plans, emails and rosters have all been found. Once the information is translated and declassified, it’s routed to the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. National Central Bureau and the Interpol General Secretariat. Interpol member states receive the evidence next. Information flows both ways to facilitate comprehensive information sharing, which is vital to the process because it allows agencies to benefit from each other’s knowledge. Over 1,800 insurgent-related phone numbers in 45 countries worldwide and 1,300 investigative leads on foreign fighter extremists from Europe, the Middle East and Africa have been stored. Global sharing of evidence and information is a key element in identifying foreign support and curbing criminal activity.

In 2007, one of Vennlig’s biggest triumphs was the discovery of a mammoth cache of documents in an al-Qaida safe house in the city of Sinjar, Iraq, near the Syrian border. U.S. and coalition forces turned up nearly 700 foreign fighter profiles during the raid. These profiles, known as the Sinjar records, provided a bounty of identifying information on foreign fighters operating in Iraq, including birthdates, nationalities, recruiters, routes into Iraq and psychological profiles. The records revealed that the largest number of fighters, 40 percent, were from Saudi Arabia. However, intelligence officials were surprised to learn that much less populated Libya contributed the second highest number of fighters, at 18 percent.

“No previous study has indicated that more than 4 percent of fighters were Libyan,” West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center pointed out after analyzing the Sinjar records in 2007. Additionally, the records suggested that fighters from Libya and Morocco were more likely to become suicide bombers than fighters from other countries. This treasure trove of data has been useful in identifying extremists worldwide by tracking and linking them to subsequent crimes and associations, providing them little or no anonymity.

Vennlig’s sister program, Hamah, provided the paper trail that helped convict 31 radical religious group members planning to overthrow the government of Azerbaijan. After killing the group’s leader, Azer Misirkhanov, in Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force troops recovered phone numbers, photos and, most noteworthy, a scrap of paper with names and Western Union account information, which revealed a terrorist financial network. The documents seized were instrumental in the conviction of 31 extremists in Baku, Azerbaijan.







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— Ronald K. Noble,  
Interpol Secretary-General

Misirkhanov was the mastermind of several terror attacks leading up to the 2008 Afghan presidential election, instigator in a plot to blow up the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline, and leader of a radical religious group in Azerbaijan. The Misirkhanov case also illustrates the significance of two-way information sharing between Vennlig/Hamah and Interpol. The Interpol “red notice,” a request from a country for a provisional arrest and extradition of a wanted person, served a vital role as it helped intelligence officials identify Misirkhanov as one of the casualties in that battle.

Hamah has yet to reach Vennlig’s level of success. A U.S. European Command intelligence official told *per Concordiam* in April 2011: “We haven’t hit the Sinjar jackpot yet [in Afghanistan]. We just haven’t found that data yet.”

Despite the tens of billions of dollars spent each year on Afghanistan operations and reconstruction, the Allies have not “adequately trained or equipped authorities on ways to take, store and share ‘strong identifying information,’” Interpol told the AP in April 2011. Interpol chief Ronald Noble warned that the absence of identifying data on prisoners allows them to move across international borders undetected and “until this glaring and serious void in the world’s anti-terror efforts is filled, no country can consider itself secure from criminals and terrorists who are essentially being given the opportunity to travel internationally, elude detection and to engage in future terrorist activity.”

The acquisition of pocket litter has proven to be a priceless tool for Vennlig and Hamah. Intelligence analysts attest that examination of this information is an important tool for confirming or disproving a suspect’s account of his whereabouts and actions. Items retrieved from ter-

## Information Flow for Projects Vennlig and Hamah



**IRAQ/AFGHANISTAN  
RECOVERED DATA**



**U.S. AND COALITION FORCES**



**U.S.  
DEPARTMENT  
OF DEFENSE**



A document belonging to Azer Misirkhanov recovered in Khost Province, Afghanistan, at the time of his death in November 2009. Documents written in foreign languages are translated and declassified for dissemination through Interpol.

rorists have helped convict them in court. A 2007 *Wall Street Journal* article recounts a raid in Rawah, Iraq, in June 2003, during which Soldiers captured pocket litter that led to the arrest of two suspected extremists. After being sentenced to 15 years for laundering money, both defendants admitted that items captured in the raid, and calls to Syria documented on their cellphone, sealed their conviction.

More recently, pocket litter was recovered from Osama bin Laden upon his death in May 2011. The litter included 500 euros and two telephone numbers that reportedly were sewn into bin Laden's clothing. These types of clues can be priceless to counterterrorism efforts. Some news reports

speculate the litter found on bin Laden could lead officials to al-Qaida second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri.

An intelligence official cautions that the projects "provide leads and are not evidence or a case." However small, these clues gathered from the battlefield help create a big picture, and can produce significant results. The collaboration between coalition ground forces and intelligence experts can help tighten the net around extremists. "You can't fight terrorism from the (European Union) only, or the United States, or with your allies. Al-Qaida operates internationally. You have to fight it worldwide," Interpol's Noble told *USA Today* in 2007. □



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