



WMRC Article

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US Federal Agencies Create
Master 'Watch List' of
Terrorists

United States: US Federal Agencies Create Master 'Watch List' of Terrorists

In an attempt to address one of the critical failures that prevented US authorities from thwarting the 11 September 2001 attacks, the government has established a master 'watch list' of terrorists it is tracking around the globe, as a way to ensure a higher degree of co-ordination between various intelligence and law enforcement agencies domestically and abroad in the hopes of preventing future attacks.

WMRC Perspective	
Significance	The US government currently tracks suspected terrorists in a variety of different agencies, using different criteria and a wide range of technologies and protocols for sharing their respective information. This silo approach is one of the failures in the US intelligence systems that led to the success of the 11 September attackers.
Implications	The establishment of a single list of suspected terrorists is a top priority of the newly-formed US Counterterrorism Center, as the current system of information is compartmentalised, making it nearly impossible to effectively cross-reference data from other sources within the US and among allies. A single system for tracking terrorists will greatly enhance the ability of the intelligence and law enforcement agencies to identify and possibly apprehend suspected terrorists before they strike again and is long overdue.
Outlook	WMRC believes the establishment of a master list is one of the most important steps US officials needed to take in order to capitalise on the vast amount of information the government has about suspected terrorists and their activities, which has been dramatically increased as captured terrorists have begun to reveal more about their networks. However, the inherent adaptability of terrorists and the thousands who have been trained by al-Qaida alone that remain unknown to authorities means the value of a master list and information sharing - although critically important - will have limited benefits.

Looking for Bin Laden? Send a Memo

The new master list is long overdue. The absence of such a list - which surprised many casual observers in the US and abroad - was a colossal failure on the part of US authorities and, according to a report by the US Congress on the 11 September 2001 attacks, greatly contributed to the ability of the terrorists to carry out their mission successfully. For example, two of the terrorists on the plane that hit the north tower of the World Trade Center were on a watch list held by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) when they were allowed entry into the US more than two years before the attacks were carried out. Because the CIA is an agency with a mandate to focus on foreign threats, while the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is tasked with domestic ones, the information was somehow never passed on from CIA to FBI. Another reason for the lack of co-operation is the competitive nature that exists between the two agencies and the desire to protect their own 'turf' and resist any loss of control. Most other countries, including US allies, rely upon similar master lists to keep track of suspected terrorists and would-be evil-doers. There is no logical reason why the US has failed to follow suit until now. The only real reasons given by authorities from the agency in question relate to clichés such as 'procedure', 'policies', and 'protocols' - bureaucratic-speak for simply defending the old way of doing things.

The List

According to the Bush administration the master list could contain up to 100,000 names of suspected terrorists. Currently, lists of suspects are held by a variety of different federal agencies including the CIA, FBI, Immigration, State Department, Border Patrol, Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security, among others. There are more than a dozen separate lists held by different federal agencies. A master list would be compiled from this information, following the development of a common definition of who should or should not be on it. The information would then be more easily maintained and shared among the federal agencies tracking terrorist activities directed both against targets within the US and US interests abroad. The list will also eventually be made available in one form or another to allied intelligence services such as those in Britain, Australia, France and Germany. Following establishment of appropriate safeguards and controls, the list is intended to also be shared with law enforcement officials at state and even local level throughout the US. After all, many of the 11 September

terrorists - two of whom were already on the CIA's watch list - lived for years in small communities, and local police are often the ones with the best information about suspicious people in their towns.

Casting a Wider Net

In response to the threat that terrorists reportedly pose to non-government targets such as electric utility and telecommunications infrastructure, water supplies, transportation networks or large commercial buildings and stadiums, the private sector is a critical partner in protecting against a terrorist attack. And as the private sector becomes more vigilant about screening people who use their facilities, enter their buildings or register for their services, they can also play an important role in identifying suspected terrorists. If airlines, for example, could cross-reference their passenger lists with the new master list of suspected terrorists, it could be another method for tracking down suspects. Banks and financial institutions could check a new account-holder against the list as could a utility company signing up a new customer. The nature of the US requires anyone travelling to or remaining in the country for any reasonable amount of time, especially if they want to assimilate and blend in, to adhere to certain societal norms, which presents a variety of opportunities to attempt to identify suspects. However, there are also problems associated with the collection of personal information by so many entities, many of which are not under the watchful eye of the government.

Protecting Freedom by Taking it Away

The balance between vigilance in maintaining security against a respect for human rights and civil liberties is a difficult problem. The nature of increasing security most often means there is an erosion of personal freedom and privacy. Intelligence services are often tasked with maintaining a precarious balance between aggressively pursuing the 'bad guys' in order to prevent them from carrying out their deeds, while not trampling upon the rights and liberties of the 'good guys' in the process. And the balance that is so difficult to achieve and maintain is forever in flux as the needs and the values of society change. Civil liberties organisations are already up in arms about the controversial Patriot Act - hastily passed by the US Congress just weeks after the 11 September attacks - which grants broader authority to law enforcement agencies to conduct surveillance against suspected terrorists. The collection and sharing of personal information by a panoply of government agencies and private companies will result in an unprecedented amount of information being collected, not only just about 100,000 suspected terrorists on the master list, but on all Americans, visitors and countless others.

Are You on the List?

The false security of the new 'master list' is that it only shares information about suspected terrorists. If anything is known about the nature of al-Qaida and similar organisations following 11 September 2001, it is that there are literally thousands of people who have already gone through al-Qaida training camps and are now somewhere 'out there' and mostly likely already among us, and the authorities have no idea who 'they' are. German intelligence has estimated that 70,000 people received military training through al-Qaida, with 6-7,000 of these trained in terrorism. Terrorist organisations themselves are also evolving. They have become more organised and better financed and are motivated to inflict as much damage as possible. Sometimes they are structured as flat and linear, where the top person designs strategy down to the smallest detail, but at other times terrorist activity is organised from the bottom up by autonomous local cells. The terrorist threat is now more diffuse and more difficult to define.

Outlook and Implications

Al-Qaida's dispersion from Afghanistan has made it more difficult to track and many experts hold the view that the terrorist network is more capable and more dangerous than it was before the September 2001 attack. The establishment of a master list brings US intelligence agencies into the pre-modern age, considering it is a step that should have been taken years ago. The value of the list will be enhanced by the role of business, considering it has become a target of violence, and because an increasing amount of infrastructure is in private hands (85% in the United States). In fact, it could be argued that the level of responsibility the private sector shares in protecting its own interests as well as those of the public has dramatically increased as the nature of the threats facing society have changed. Business is now considered a legitimate target by terrorists and the implications will surely be felt on their bottom line. However, all of the existing prevention efforts will only go so far to protect against an enemy that is bound and determined to succeed and even willing to give up his own life to do so. Deterrence does not work against the suicidal. The US and its allies should be paying more attention to winning hearts and minds and show that they are interested in improving the lives of people who are disenfranchised politically and economically. Otherwise, the 'master list' will continue to grow.

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