



Chapter Two

THE UNITED STATES AND REGIONAL SECURITY

Plenary Session No. 1
Saturday 3 December, 8.45 am

SPEAKER

Frances Fragos Townsend
Assistant to President George W. Bush for
Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

The role of the US in Persian Gulf Security is apparent at all levels: diplomatic, economic, military and indeed even socially and culturally.

The most taxing military engagement of the US – Iraq – is in the region, while Gulf states are the objects of much of the ‘transformational diplomacy’ on which the US is now engaged as part of its broader campaign against the sources of terrorism.

Washington’s engagement with the region is extensive. The US has a large force deployed in Iraq, where it is seeking to restore security, counter an insurgency, train security forces and shepherd the introduction of democratic government.

The relationships between Washington and most Gulf countries are close and multi-layered. For all Gulf countries except Iran, the US is the ultimate guarantor of security. There is a host of agreements on defence cooperation, trade and other issues. Military links are strong and, Iraq aside, the US has a substantial military footprint, which includes the hosting of Naval Forces Central Command and the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet at Bahrain, as well as US forces’ presence in Kuwait and Qatar, the UAE, Oman and the remaining small-scale presence in Saudi Arabia.

The broad strategic importance of the region to the US is clear. However, for Washington since 11 September, 2001, the ‘war on terror’ – for which President Bush has sought support in the Gulf, as elsewhere in the world – has been one overriding priority. It was on this aspect of a multifaceted set

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of relationships that the US delegation leader, **Frances Fragos Townsend**, chose to focus. Describing transnational terrorism as ‘the defining threat of our era’, the presidential adviser and senior White House official listed a series of steps that she believed the region needed to take in order to defeat it.

Like the spectre of nuclear war during the Cold War period, ‘transnational terrorism threatens the security of all our countries, the health and stability of all our economies and the safety and liberty of all our citizens’, she said. Innocent citizens from many countries had been ‘killed tragically and senselessly in New York and Riyadh, in Beslan and Bali, in Madrid, London, Delhi, Baghdad, Sharm al-Sheikh and most recently in Amman’. While victims had been from all races and creeds, they had most often been predominantly Muslim. Ms Townsend noted that a non-sectarian group of more than 170 Islamic scholars from 40 countries had proclaimed, in the Oman Declaration signed in 2005, that ‘Islam denounces all forms of terrorism’.

‘These attacks and others we have thwarted before they could take innocent lives are the work of a diabolical enemy’, Ms Townsend said. ‘The enemy we face is a transnational movement of extremist organisations, networks and individuals and their state and non-state supporters that are fuelled by an ideology that distorts Islam and espouses hatred, intolerance and violence’. By distorting Islam while pretending to act in its name, she said, ‘our enemies have made Islam, a religion of peace, into another of the victims of terrorism.’ The terrorist enemy, Ms Townsend warned, ‘aspires to regional dominance and would see all of the Gulf countries ruled by radical extremists and all its citizens suffer under the yoke of oppression’.



Above: Lieutenant General Sheikh Rashed Bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, Bahrain's Minister of the Interior

We must develop effective information sharing practices as a foundation of international cooperation

The international community could not afford to be complacent or ambiguous in its stance on transnational terrorism. A comprehensive strategy to defeat it should include the development of sound regional security practices: Ms Townsend proceeded to spell out priorities for these in the Gulf region.

The first of these was a strong programme for **sharing information** within regional countries. International travel had become more common, and economies and financial systems had become increasingly interconnected. Terrorists were recruiting and training, transferring money and staging operations across borders. 'We must develop effective information sharing practices as a foundation of international cooperation', Ms Townsend said. This would help to secure borders against smuggling of cash and weapons and prevent travel using fraudulent documents and the abuse of financial systems. Information could be shared as appropriate between and among embassies, security services, law enforcement agencies and militaries. It should include sourcing information to establish its accuracy and credibility.

The second priority was **border controls** to prevent the flow of funds, weapons, explosives and extremists supporting terrorist organisations. 'Borders are our first line of defence against transnational terrorism', Ms Townsend said, 'but deployment of border guards is only the beginning of border security'. Regional cooperation was necessary to improve security on long coasts and land borders. Regional countries should agree to require valid travel documents including biometric identifiers, and should be able to share information in real time between border security services so that information in one country could lead to the arrest of a terrorist entering another. Regional nations should increase cooperation on documentation and screening of cargo. They should invest in biological, radiological and nuclear and conventional weapon detection capabilities, and defray the costs by coordinating their investment.

Thirdly, coordination was required to safeguard **financial systems**. 'Money is the life blood of terrorist organisations', Ms Townsend said. 'Each country must enact domestic laws to punish terrorists' financing and money laundering, and promulgate domestic regulations to require reporting and accountability from its financial institutions.' Many regional countries were

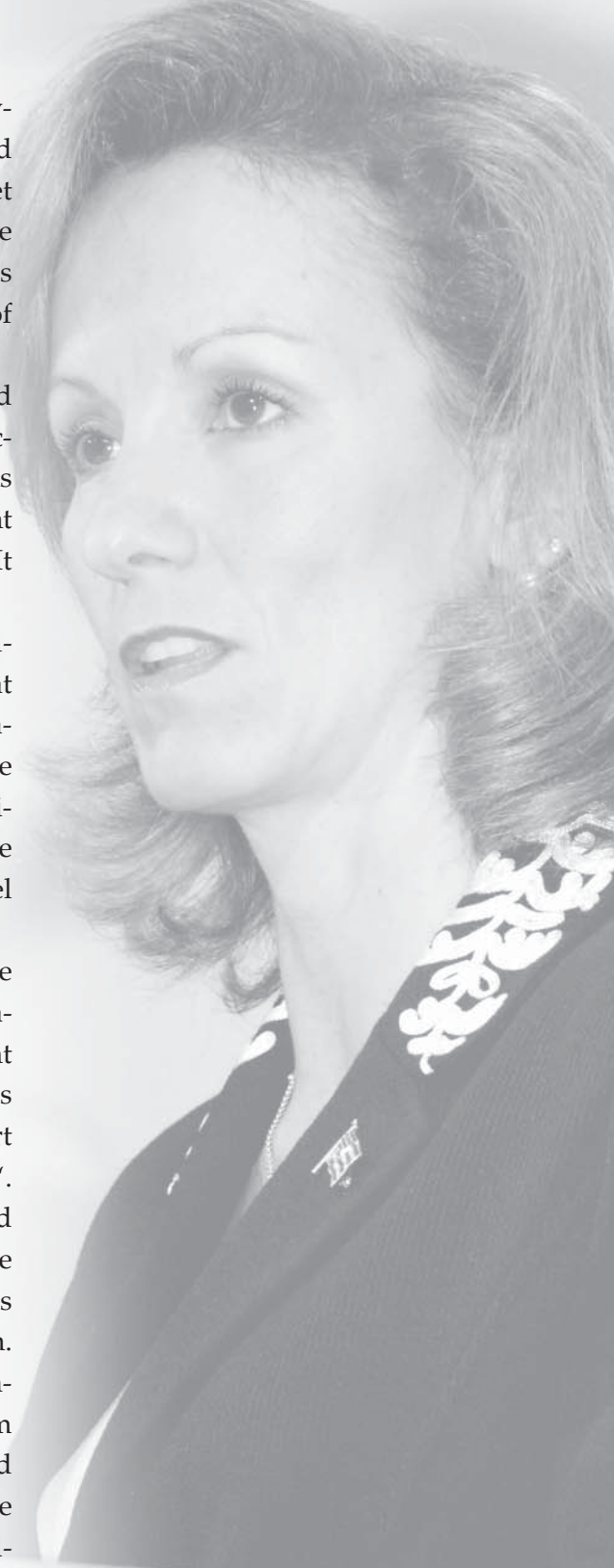
members of the Financial Action Task Force on Money-Laundering, and those that were not members should join it or its regional sub-groups. Each country should set up a financial intelligence unit and cooperate with those units in other countries. Such units should be members of the Egmont Group, an international body composed of national financial intelligence units.

Ms Townsend called on each country to bring in laws and enforcement capabilities in order to impose financial sanctions and travel restrictions established by United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1267 and 1617. 'Enforcement of these resolutions is not simply a question of capability. It is also a question of political will', she said.

While the measures listed above could improve security in the Gulf to a great degree, Ms Townsend said that true progress required addressing four additional fundamental issues. The ideology of violent extremism must be confronted, as must state sponsorship of terrorist organisations. Furthermore, there must be progress on the future of Iraq and in peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

Ideology of violent extremism. There must be no safe haven for those 'who proclaim a deviant misrepresentation of Islam in order to justify violence against innocent civilians'. All governments and all religious authorities should be clear that the murder of innocents was 'not part of any legitimate political movement or religious faith'. She noted that people in Amman, Jordan, had protested against recent suicide bombings there, claimed by the Iraq insurgent leader Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, who was then disowned by 76 members of his family in Jordan. 'The ideological underpinnings of terrorism must be confronted first and most forcefully in the Arab and Muslim worlds in policies and political rhetoric, in mosques and on street corners, in schools, on television, radio and the internet', Ms Townsend said. She added that Arab leaders were campaigning to discredit the ideology of violent extremism. For example, Kuwait was to be commended for its establishment of a centre bringing together regional Ministers of Islamic Affairs. 'We must not only repudiate the violent ideology of terrorism: we must cultivate an ideology of freedom and reform', she said.

Gulf countries had made admirable progress. They were working to advance social, political and economic

A black and white portrait of Frances Fragos Townsend, a woman with shoulder-length wavy hair, wearing a dark jacket with a white floral pattern on the collar. She is looking slightly to the left of the camera.

Above: Frances Fragos Townsend
Assistant to President George W. Bush for
Homeland Security and Counterterrorism

The modern threat of transnational terrorism calls for a modern era of Gulf leadership

reform through initiatives promoting indigenous reform efforts and vibrant civil societies, as well as development of local businesses. 'This ideology, which advances the universal values of freedom, democracy and human rights, and not the terrorist ideology which offers only intolerance, violence and oppression, is the future of the Gulf region.'

State sponsorship of terrorism. Ms Townsend said that some neighbouring countries sponsored terrorism directly or indirectly, pursuing production of nuclear weapons. 'They engage in a futile attempt to stem the tide of progress, liberty and democracy that is sweeping the Middle East', she said. 'They provide money, training and weapons to Hamas, Hizbullah and other terrorist organisations that target civilians in Iraq and across the broader Middle East, and they oppress their own citizens.'

These 'rogue states', she said, must be addressed through multilateral bodies such as the Gulf Cooperation Council or the League of Arab States, or through new regional coalitions. 'You must send the united message to these countries that oppression and violation of human rights domestically and intimidation and support for terrorism internationally have no place in the Middle East', she said. Their citizens, she said, 'desire to live free from fear and with the hope of prosperity just as our citizens live. The nations of the Gulf must lead the broader Middle East in undertaking a regional approach to bring these errant neighbours into the brotherhood of progressive states.'

Ms Townsend continued by noting that **Iraq** had established a constitutional government and would

soon vote in parliamentary elections, but was beset by a violent and destructive insurgency. It needed strong support from the international community and regional neighbours. Gulf nations must help to stop the flow of money and materials, and must counter the message of violent extremists who encouraged suicide bombers and foreign fighters to travel to Iraq. Gulf states, she said, must support Iraq's efforts by sharing intelligence, cooperating with Iraqi law enforcement and responding to detention and extradition requests. They should 'identify and bring to justice the network throughout the region that supports these terrorists and aids insurgents'. The future of the Gulf region, she said, 'was inextricably intertwined with the future of Iraq'.

Young people who had gone to fight in Iraq would return home to Gulf countries bringing violent extremism with them. 'This is not a supposition or speculation', Ms Townsend said, but 'unfortunately it is the terrorists' vision of regional domination'. Ayman Al Zawahiri and Zarqawi talked of 'extending the jihad wave to countries neighbouring Iraq'. Thus, the fate of Iraq's government could determine the fate of the region. 'The Gulf region and the international community must disrupt the networks sending foreign fighters, suicide bombers and roadside explosives into Iraq and prevent them from establishing a foothold in the region.'

Israel–Palestine. The countries of the Gulf must also support peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Ms Townsend said. Israel had taken a courageous step by disengaging from Gaza. The momentum must be converted into achieving the objec-

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tives of the road map for Middle East peace. At this critical juncture, she said, Gulf countries must support the Palestinian Authority politically and financially. The authority, though challenged by militant groups, 'is the best hope for Palestinian peace and the best hope for creating the prosperity necessary to sustain an independent Palestinian state'.

Ms Townsend concluded by saying that the 'modern threat of transnational terrorism calls for a modern era of Gulf leadership: a modern generation of Gulf statesmen to shape the future of freedom, peace, tolerance and prosperity for the region'.

Questions and answers

The tone of the discussion period clearly indicated that, for a number of regional delegates, US credibility had suffered from the events of recent years. Washington's reaction to 11 September and the conduct of its 'global war on terror' had aroused considerable concern. This was evident from all the questions posed to Ms Townsend.

Dr Saif Al Asaly, Professor of Economics at Sana'a University, asked what the US could do in the Gulf region to get ordinary people to support its fight against terrorism. **Ms Townsend** responded that 'the greatest threat is the complacency of our people. I worry about it in the United States and I think that leaders worry about it around the world.... Each leader must undertake an effort to rally his own people, his own citizens, to support the government's efforts.'

Dr Abdullah Al Shayji, Associate Professor of International Relations and American Studies at Kuwait University, said the region appreciated the sincerity of the US campaign against terrorism, but the reputation and credibility of the US had been damaged. He referred to the Arab-Israeli conflict and to Iraq, and said recent opinion polls had shown people in the region were feeling less secure, believed terrorism was gaining the upper hand and that Iraq was likely to be dismembered. The US, he said, should set an example and should be the leader 'on moral grounds'. **Ms Townsend** said President George W. Bush had called for the establishment of a Palestinian state, and had made an unshakeable commitment to the people of Iraq. Furthermore, she said, the US

was reaching out to the people of the region, for example by trying to increase issuance of non-immigrant visas in Saudi Arabia.

However, this very point was picked up by **Waleed Al Banawi**, Executive Vice President of Banawi Industrial Group, Jeddah, who said exchanges between Saudi Arabia and the US had suffered and that this had affected the business community. The rate of establishing new joint ventures had slowed. He asked whether the US Department of Homeland Security would revisit its procedures and practices so as to differentiate between terrorists and well-intentioned citizens, professionals and students who wanted to continue the bonds between the two countries. **Ms Townsend** responded that the issue was a high priority for President Bush. The US was seeking to refine the 'filter' on entry into the country so as to exclude the correct people and make it 'more friendly for others to come in who really wanted business visas, student visas and medical visas... It's by no means solved but I think it is significant that this year the issuance is up five times over what it was last year. We still need to do more.'

Dr Gilles Kepel, Professor at the Institute of Political Studies, Paris, wondered whether the battle against terrorism was being hampered by the difficulty of distinguishing between radicals and support groups, and by the way in which some suspects had been treated, for example, being transported and detained in camps in Europe. **Ms Townsend** addressed the issue by saying it was not simply about law enforcement, but about the need for governments – including that of the US – to engage more with their Muslim populations. 'As you engage in these dialogues, what you realise is most of the people in those communities feel alienated from the government's effort, mostly because of a lack of communication. When you open that channel for communication not only do you increase understanding and learn about the community but you also have the opportunity to persuade them to participate in the effort. Without their participation we are not going to be successful and so I think it is actually not one specific issue about how we do enforcement it's the broader issue about how we engage the Muslim population in these countries.'

Below: Dr Abdullah Al Shayji
Associate Professor of International Relations
and American Studies in the Department of
Political Science, Kuwait University



