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and the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIP)

Panel discussion on

Counter-Terrorism: Trends - Challenges - Strategies

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“Is Austria a Target of Terrorism?”

Remarks by

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It is a great pleasure for me to be here today at the *Amerika Haus* in Vienna. I thank the American Embassy and the OIIP for their kind invitation.

How likely, how potent is the threat of terrorism here in Austria, a country that is an anchor of peace and stability in the heart of Europe? What kind of terrorist violence might Austria face? Where does the most serious terrorist threat come from, or at least seem to come from?

Recent history seems to tell us that there is not much for Austria to worry about in terms of terrorism. There has not been a successful high casualty terrorist attack in Austria in the last decade. And indeed, we should avoid being unnecessarily alarmist if there is no need. After all, creating undue panic and paranoia – wasting our resources – is only playing the game of the terrorists.

According to an EU Barometer opinion poll in July 2007, only 4% of the Austrian population felt that terrorism was among the two most important issues in their country, against 12% on average in the European Union.

In an interview almost a year ago¹, Minister of the Interior Platter rightly declared that Austria “ist weiter kein primäres Terrorziel, allerdings auch kein Insel der Seligen“. Austria is not a primary terrorist target, at least for the present, but it is not immune to terrorism either.

Let me then start first by outlining some reasons why the terrorist threat against Austria appears to be not as acute as it may be elsewhere.

Austria is a small neutral country, an active participant in international co-operation but not often in the spotlight with respect to today's major issues and conflicts. Austria concentrates on commerce, prosperity, freedom and peace. Its army is sized for self defence, not aggression, and it is not generally considered to be an occupying or interventionist power in any part of the world.

Austria does not discriminate against radical groups in terms of law enforcement. It does not arrest leaders or members of these groups unless they violate domestic laws or pose a clear and present danger to the public, and it has good intelligence co-operation with European and other countries to help determine when such threats might arise. The police force is well trained and is open to international co-operation and support when needed.

¹ Interview to *die Presse*, 25.07.2007.

In short, the profile of Austria as a nation does not currently align with the factors that appear to provoke terrorist rage and attacks, with one possible exception. That exception is the difficult issue of full integration of immigrant populations into the mainstream of society. In this regard Austria faces a daunting challenge. Austria is reported to be among the countries in Europe having the fastest growth rate of persons of the Muslim faith.

Nevertheless no country is completely immune to terrorism.

Let's review for a moment some aspects of development of terrorism. Each terrorist group is different, so the patterns of development will also be different, but there are some common elements.

Regardless of its origins or purpose, if terrorism is left unchecked, it can become a self-sustaining process. There are supply chains, division of tasks, salaries to be paid, fundraising efforts, recruitment, training camps, propaganda, community services, and many other activities. Vested interests emerge which depend on terrorism for economic or ideological success.

As the process of terrorism evolves, groups may splinter, either deliberately or through internal disagreements, into factions with differing tactics. It is here that a danger emerges to countries aligned with the West which are perceived to be "soft" targets, regardless of their level of political tolerance towards the terrorist groups.

Additionally, there is a growing overlap between the process of terrorism and organized crime. Terrorists increasingly use the same supply, transport and money-moving networks as those used by criminal groups. Terrorists resort to the "services" of criminals, such as fraudulent travel documents or smuggling of weapons and explosives.

This is important because tolerance or neutrality towards groups affiliated with terrorist activities does not protect a country from a possible increase in violent crimes committed as a consequence of growing affiliations among criminals and terrorists.

If we look at terrorism as a process, we can grasp the ramifications and the multiple facets of terrorism. And in today's globalized world, a world that is increasingly linked together and interdependent, it is clear that these activities are transnational. With the growing ease of international travel, communication and transfer of money, few countries are truly isolated from the rest of the world.

Globalization has greatly enhanced the ability to put subversive and criminal ideas, including terrorist schemes, into action. Let's take the Internet for instance, which has become to a large extent the symbol of globalization. The Internet today serves all; it is user-blind. It offers many advantages to legitimate users, but to those who seek to use it for criminal purposes as well. And the sophistication, speed, and the relative anonymity that characterize the Internet and computer technologies are a major challenge to law enforcement.

In Austria and on average in the European Union, about 55% of the people are regular Internet users. This is way beyond a 20% average worldwide. With this increasing Internet penetration, countries are also increasingly vulnerable to cyber attacks. Cyber terrorism has a significant disruption potential in today's world where most, if not all critical infrastructures are networked and connected to the outside via computer networks. A particularly worrying threat is the potential conjunction of cyber attacks with traditional physical attacks, or the launching of a cyber attack during a major natural disaster crisis. Cyber terrorism could also aim at inflicting economic costs, at times where communications and information exchange are essential to the functioning of our societies and to the global economic system.

As the internet is increasingly being relied upon as a radicalization and recruitment tool by groups with terrorist goals, high usage of the Internet by Austria's population, arguably, increasingly exposes the Austrian public to a well orchestrated onslaught of such material.

Moreover, even if a country has a low threat level for terrorism, it may be vulnerable to economic disruptions as a by-product of terrorist attacks against other targets. In particular, Internet disruptions directed at financial institutions elsewhere might have a significant impact on Austria.

Coming back to the terrorist threat in Austria, I would like to review some other aspects which I think could be vulnerability factors.

Let's think like terrorists, and let's think in terms of targets. A central goal of terrorists is to achieve widespread publicity for their cause and demonstrate their capabilities. How do you do that? You can resort to an unusual or spectacular form of attack. You can choose a particular timing in order to hijack the media coverage of a particular event, or by taking people by surprise. You can target a symbolic and well-known building or place. You can choose a strategic target, part of a wider network of infrastructures or chain, in order to maximize the disruptive impact of your attack possibly across national borders.

Keeping this in the back of our mind, let's now look at Austria.

An important factor exposing Austria to the terrorist threat, or more specifically exposing Vienna, is the number of major events hosted by the country. Another factor is the presence of many attractive symbolic targets like the headquarters of international organizations. Even if Vienna is maybe not one of the "World capitals" like New York, London, Paris, Moscow or Hong Kong, it can be viewed as a soft target, or at least as hosting an array of soft targets.

Vienna is a beautiful city with excellent municipal and commercial infrastructure. It is not surprising that the organizers of so many congresses and international conferences choose to hold their events here. Vienna has been among the world's leading conference destinations for three years in a row now. Very often, these events involve high-profile participants, who can be attractive targets for terrorists, such as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice or Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni attending the *Women Leader Conference* at the end of May last year.

Every year, Vienna is host to mass events, gathering huge crowds in a relatively small space. The Vienna marathon, for instance had more than 30,000 runners this year. June 7 will mark the start of the European Football Championship, three weeks of enormous crowds, with more than 500 000 expected visitors. For some terrorists, such mass sport events are symbolic of Western evils. Think about it: men and women, often scantily clad, interacting together in public places, chatting, laughing, and drinking alcohol. Recently, al Qaeda-inspired groups have reportedly called on the Internet for attacks against Austria and Switzerland during the *Europameisterschaft*.

The Austrian media reports, for example, that during the upcoming Euro 2008 Football Championship, the Vienna rail and subway system will need to transport some 2.7 million passengers per day — an overall increase of 25% — with up to a 50% increase envisioned in passenger transport to the stadiums. Let us ask ourselves, if we were terrorists, might we perhaps see this as an attractive and vulnerable target?

The increased risk of terror attacks during large scale events can be mitigated through international co-operation. For example, security plans include arrangements for a large number of German police to augment the Austrian police force. This kind of co-operation means that Austria does not require an expensive, permanent increase in the size of its police force when abrupt increases in threat level are only temporary.

A number of international organizations have established headquarters in Vienna: the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and of course also my organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and others. Because of the political significance of their activities, these organizations represent potentially attractive targets for terrorists. We have already seen UN offices attacked elsewhere in the World, like in Bagdad (18 August 2003) or more recently in Algiers (11

December 2007). In the eyes of some people, some of the international organizations in Vienna represent “the West” just as much as the Twin Towers used to, or represent a world order they are dissatisfied with. Sadly, there is a trade-off between the economic and political advantages of hosting international organizations and the increase terrorist threat level they bring with them.

On the ideological plane, the concept of a clash of civilizations that some have been describing is a dangerous perception on both sides. In the eyes of certain terrorists and violent extremists, Austria is part of “the West”, which is the object of their hatred, their enemy, and Austria could therefore also be attacked. For example, the military commitment of Austria in Afghanistan, albeit limited, has probably contributed to this phenomenon.

On the other hand, overgeneralization of this clash might lead to discrimination against certain groups who fit unpopular cultural stereotypes, regardless of their actual complicity in terrorism. Therefore, the threat of terrorism also includes the threat that our reaction to it will increase mutual suspicion within society or will lead to laws that erode our individual liberties. Once taken away, such rights are very difficult to regain.

I cannot mention Austrian foreign policy without raising the much discussed question of Austria’s policy of neutrality, seen by many as a legacy of the cold war. Austria today is a member of the European Union, which is getting increasingly involved in political affairs. Austria makes its own foreign policy choices, like sending troops to Afghanistan or recognizing Kosovo as an independent country. Such actions may be understood by some as anything but neutral and probably do not please everyone all the time.

Because of the ramifications of terrorism, because terrorism is increasingly diffuse and decentralized, some would argue there cannot be such a thing as neutrality; there cannot be such a thing as a comprehensive or all-encompassing coexistence deal. They would argue that neutrality cannot work in an increasingly decentralized world with different non-state actors pursuing a variety of agendas. In today’s world, it is impossible to be neutral on everything and please everyone all the time.

So what kinds of terrorism is Austria actually facing? How much should Austria worry and about what?

The Austrian authorities have reported different kinds of terrorist activity in the country. The 2007 report of the Austrian *Federal Agency for State Protection and Counter-Terrorism* discusses the terrorist threats coming from left wing and anarchist movements, extreme right groups, animal rights activists, and also violent extremist groups of Islamist militants. Some separatist groups, such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), qualified as terrorist organizations by the EU and the United States, are also active on Austrian soil, although targeting other countries.

The nuance comes of course from the assessment of the relative threat posed by these different groups. In the 1990s, Neo-Nazi and far rights groups were the primary source of terrorist activity. What about today? If we look at the recent “failed, foiled or successful attacks” reported by Austria to Europol², we have one such attack only for 2007, which was attributed to a left wing group³. But we have also seen a failed attack against the US Embassy here in Vienna, on 1 October 2007, by a man of Bosnian origin, suspected of having connections with, or having been manipulated by radical Islamists.

If we broaden the spectrum of facts we rely on to assess the different terrorist threats to Austria, we get a better picture and we must also acknowledge the excellent work of the Austrian law-enforcement agencies to prevent attacks.

² EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, [TE-SAT 2008](#), Europol

³ On 12 March 2007, a device looking like a pipe bomb was found in the underground parking of a bank. The pipe bomb later turned out to be a dummy. A message attached to the device demanded amnesty for members of the Red Army Fraction (RAF) imprisoned in Germany.

In 2007, five individuals suspected of Islamist affiliation were arrested by the Austrian authorities on terrorism-related charges as compared to one such arrest in 2006⁴. An interesting detail is that most of these individuals have Austrian citizenship and would fall in the category of so-called "home-grown" terrorists, radicalized young Muslims of second generation. Three of them were arrested in connection with the much publicized terror video threat to Austria and Germany released on the Internet on 11 March 2007 by the *Global Islamic Media Front*, which warned both countries of attacks unless they pulled out their troops from Afghanistan.

Austrian citizens have also been targeted by terrorist organizations while abroad. Two Austrian tourists were abducted in February in the South of Tunisia by the *al Qaeda organization in the Islamic Maghreb* claiming a ransom and the withdrawal of Austria from Afghanistan.

Austrian intelligence would appear to concur that, today, the most serious terrorism based threat to the country comes from Islamist terrorism and violent extremism.

I would like to briefly conclude now with some thoughts.

Although Austria is not a primary terrorist target, there are factors that make it vulnerable to terrorism. Arguably, the main danger is not mass civilian terror attacks, but targeted attacks on international high value targets, such as international organizations' headquarters or international events hosted by Austria.

The terrorist threat in Austria is not a "steady state" condition, which makes managing it more difficult. If the threat level were constantly high, many more measures would be in place to harden targets and protect vital infrastructure. However, because the perception of danger is usually low, this puts Austria in a situation similar to the United States prior to the events of September 11, 2001. That is to say, there is preparedness here, but it is more reactive than pro-active, because the enormous expense of a pro-active approach cannot be justified without more specific evidence of an imminent threat.

Preparedness efforts have to match risk assessment and priorities. Sufficient resources should be allocated to mitigation and recovery capacity in case a terrorist attack occurs. I believe that Austria is correctly assessing the threat, making adjustment as conditions change and has made contingency plans to handle the aftermath of attacks. In that regard I should say that contingency planning has its limits. It is impossible to anticipate every possible circumstance. General planning, which includes the necessary resilience to anticipate the destruction or non-availability of one's planned resources, is extremely important.

However, equally important is enough specificity in advance planning to avoid disasters associated with delays, such as happened in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. The structure of contingency plans should ensure good command and control and the ability to rapidly mobilize additional resources if they are needed, without waiting for decisions from afar.

Let me leave you with one last thought. When it comes to combating terrorism, tolerance of terrorist activities is not a long term solution. Terrorism is like a snake; it will come back to bite you. We cannot wait and hope for the best. And indeed, we may have already waited too long.

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⁴ Ibid. TE-SAT 2008, Europol