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## **“The Global Jihad: Leaderless Terrorism?”**

**Tuesday, June 20, 2006**

**Speaker: Dennis Pluchinsky**, former senior intelligence analyst, Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State

This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Division of International Security Studies, the RAND Corporation and the U.S. Army’s Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

Pluchinsky focused on what he characterized as an important, growing and permanent component of “the global jihad movement – leaderless terrorism.” He argued that this new manifestation of the terrorist threat contrasts with “command terrorism,” which consists of terrorist activity carried out by individuals or units that are directed or coordinated by a recognized larger organization. Command terrorism has been the primary unit of analysis for nearly 40 years. The Department of State’s annual report, for example, has traditionally focused on command terrorism – state sponsors and “foreign terrorist organizations.” Such groups share key defining characteristics, including an accepted ideology, an organizational structure with identifiable leaders and hierarchy, financial channels and logistical hubs, and “operational codes” (i.e., what the group will and will not do).

According to Pluchinsky, leaderless terrorism is political terrorist activity carried out by an individual or a small cell of people who are not connected to a parent organization. He stated that these individuals act because they are inspired by the grievance and message of a particular movement or ideology or out of personal conscience. These individuals mimic the targeting guidelines of the movement or ideology as revealed in Internet websites, broadcasts, or publications. Leaderless terrorists generally raise their own funds, train themselves, operate independently, and are not under the direct command and control a central leadership.

Leaderless terrorism is composed of two elements – “lone wolf” terrorists and “autonomous terrorist cells” (ATC). Pluchinsky explained that a lone wolf terrorist is an individual who does not belong to any organized terrorist group and carries out a terrorist attack for political, religious, or social objectives. An ATC is a set of people with a similar grievance and mindset who decide to engage in political terrorist activity but do not belong to or operate under the direct command of a larger parent organization. ATCs are usually associated with a broader movement that has a stated grievance, an identified enemy, and a proposed solution. The London

underground bombing in July 2005 was perpetrated by an ATC. Pluchinsky stated that there is no jihadist ATC template: Each cell is constructed based on local security conditions, degree of external connections, and the capabilities and personal dedication of cell members.

Al Qaeda has had a longstanding interest in utilizing leaderless terrorism to further its objective of a global jihad. Pluchinsky argued that the “global jihad movement” is an Internet-directed, lightly coordinated collection of individual jihadists, small ATCs, and remnants of the pre-9/11 al Qaeda organization.

To defend against this emerging phenomenon, Pluchinsky concluded, it is necessary to retool our analytical approaches, redirect counter-terrorism funding, and develop an effective “community-based,” counter-extremist program.

If you have any questions about this presentation, please contact Dennis Pluchinsky directly - [dpluchinsky@rocketmail.com](mailto:dpluchinsky@rocketmail.com).