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Viewing cable 09PARIS1737, FRANCE: 2009 COUNTRY REPORTS ON TERROSIM

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¶1. The French Republic in the 21st century finds itself grappling with an Islamist threat that reflects the nation's changing demographics. An estimated five to six million residents of France are Muslim - potentially a full 10 percent of the population. Several public announcements by al-Qaida (AQ) and other groups reiterate that French interests remain key targets of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In response to President Sarkozy's June comments calling for the banning of the burka in France, AQIM spelled out their intentions to attack France stating, "We will do everything in our power to avenge our sisters' and our daughters' honor, by striking France and its interests, wherever they may be."

¶2. Traditionally, local Corsican separatists, Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) members and ultra-left anarchist factions have been responsible for the majority of attacks and arrests classified as terrorism in France. However, the number and violence of ETA and Corsican attacks in France have continued their downward trend. In 2009 the French intelligence services have recognized an elevated threat from an "international European network of radical Islamists with a strong presence in France." In response to that threat, and motivated by the attacks in Mumbai, on December 1 the French Ministry of interior created the National Police Intervention Force (FIPN). The FIPN brings together the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) elements of multiple French Police units to form a 500 man SWAT team. The goal of the FIPN is to respond to multiple simultaneous terrorist attacks on French soil. France remains on high alert and recognizes that they are a target of AQIM and of other extremist groups in France and abroad.

¶3. Although no terrorist attacks took place on French soil during 2009, French interests were targeted and attacked abroad:

-- On January 5, court proceedings began in Paris for the April 2002 suicide bombing of a Djerba Synagogue. The attack killed 14 German and two French nationals. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is a co-defendant, accused of being responsible for all AQ external operations during that time frame.

-- In April, French President Sarkozy announced that France and Spain would set up a joint security committee to fight terrorism and drug trafficking. The group, which is an expansion of existing police cooperation targeted at ETA, created a joint general staff headquarters on security to lead the fight on terrorism. Shortly after the creation of the joint staff, on August 19, French police arrested three top members of the military arm of ETA: Alberto Machain, Aitzol Etxaburu and Andono Sarasola. Additionally, police found weapons and bomb making materials. Three days later on August 22, France police found and impounded three more ETA weapons caches.

On October 11, French police in Montpellier arrested the deputy commander of ETAs military wing, Lurgi Mendinueta and another senior ETA member, Jones Larretxea. On October 19, French police arrested ETAs political chief, Aitor Lizan Aguilar as well as ten other ETA members. France and Spain's near decimation of ETA leadership highlights the benefits of close regional cooperation and demonstrates the effectiveness of the French counterterrorism (CT) program.

-- On July 14, two French security service personnel, reportedly in Somalia to train government forces in CT operations, were kidnapped and held by two separate groups - Hezb al-Islam and Al-Shabab. The

later group is considered a proxy for AQ in the Horn of Africa. On August 26, the hostage held by Hezb al-Islam was freed, although the circumstances of his release or escape remain unclear. Initial reports suggested he killed his kidnappers and escaped. Later reports intimated that a ransom had been paid to Hezb al-Islam and the hostage was freed.

-- On August 18, AQIM claimed responsibility for the August 8, suicide bombing at the French Embassy in Mauritania that injured three people. The bombing took place three days after Mohammed Ould Abdel Azziz directed a successful coup against Mauritania's first freely elected president.

-- On October 9, a suspected AQ operative was arrested with his brother in Paris. The operative had been working on projects for a nuclear-research facility near Geneva. French intelligence investigators said the physicist, a man of Algerian origin, was working on analysis projects at a "very high level" related to the Large Hadron Collider at the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN. Officials say the suspect had been in contact with people linked to al Qaeda's North African wing about potential targets for terrorism in France, and he had expressed a desire to carry out such attacks but had "not committed material preparatory acts." The interior minister determined that the brothers were enough of a threat to be arrested, ending the French government's 18-month-long surveillance of them.

-- On November 26, a French citizen was kidnapped in Northern Mali. On December 8, an AQ off-shoot claimed responsibility for the kidnapping. The French intelligence services were aware of what appeared to be a rise in kidnappings of French citizens, yet remained hesitant to classify them as terrorist activity (as opposed to criminal) until a specific group had claimed responsibility and they could investigate the circumstances leading up to the kidnapping.

-- French authorities detained and prosecuted a number of people with ties to various terrorist organizations, including Islamic Terrorists (18 convictions), Corsican Nationalists (19 convictions), Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) members (28 convictions), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) (22 convictions), and Kurds with links to Kongra-Gel/Kuridstan Worker's Party (PKK) (16 convictions). It should be noted that the number of arrests of ultra-left anarchists dropped from 17 in 2008, to zero in 2009. Additionally, the number of Corsican Nationalists convicted dropped from 46 in 2008, to 19 in 2009. The number of LTTE members arrested however, jumped from two in 2008, to 22 in 2009, which may be linked to the military crackdown in Sri Lanka during this same period.

¶4. The French government undertook several CT operations with other countries including the UK, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal. In addition to undertaking operations to arrest and prosecute terrorists, France continued programs to address radicalization and extremism through the use of social and economic incentives to reduce the susceptibility of at risk populations. Of particular note, the French government went to great efforts to train police personnel to be aware of the signs of radicalization. To further combat radicalization France took judicial and administrative action against people who incite violence or hatred. French law allows non-citizens who incite hatred or violence to be expelled from France. The French government is very concerned about Islamic radicalization in the French prison system. In 2008, the governments of France, Austria and Germany jointly commissioned a study to identify key indicators of radicalization in the prison system and offer suggestions on how to prevent or minimize radicalization within the penal system. In 2009 the document was provided to all 27 members of the European Union and was requested by, and provided to, nine non-EU states. Within the EU, France hosted a conference on November 13, to help other EU-countries understand the benefits of a CT coordination center.

¶5. France's most recent CT legislation was adopted in 2006. Three articles in that legislation, pre-emptive identification checks on cross border trains, access to phone and internet connection data, and access to certain administrative records, were originally passed as temporary measures and needed to be extended by the French National Assembly. In November 2008, those provisions were extended until 2012.

¶6. Preliminary detention for suspected terrorists in France is six days. The state may thereafter place suspects under pre-trial detention for up to four years when the evidence is compelling or when the suspect is considered to present an imminent threat. In conjunction with local government, the national government continued to increase video surveillance in major cities. French law allows for seizing of assets, video and telephone surveillance, monitoring of public transport records and provides other broad powers for official access to connection data held by internet cafes and to various personal data. The sentence for a convicted terrorist can be up to 30 years for leading or organizing an attack and from 10 to 20 years for assisting a terrorist organization or operation. Notably, French nationality may be revoked, leading to expulsion from French territory, if the person in question was naturalized in the preceding 15 years.

¶7. France is actively engaged with the UN Security Council Counterterrorism Committee, the G8's Counterterrorism Action Group, the UNSCR 1267 Sanctions Committee (for the Taliban and AQ) and the European Council's Antiterrorism Strategy action plan. France is an original member of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism and continued to participate actively. France remained a member of, and contributor to, both the Proliferation and Container Security Initiatives. As a Visa Waiver Program country, France continues to upgrade passports to the Biometric Standard and held multiple talks

with the Department of Homeland Security on data sharing via the Terrorist Screening Center. On May 15 and December 1, in support of U.S. efforts to close the Guantanamo Bay facility, France accepted two former detainees and resettled them in France. On September 7, the French terrorism coordination center (UCLAT) met with S/CT Ambassador Benjamin to discuss on going CT cooperation with the United States of America. UCLAT was particularly supportive of US-France CT efforts in the Sahel and pledged closer cooperation.

¶8. On the military front, France currently has over 3,000 troops participating in operations in Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom. The current French commitment includes ground troops and air assets. French forces also participate in many military operations to help address contain and address threats to French and European security. These troops are located in Lebanon, in Africa, in counter-piracy and elsewhere, where they frequently work closely with U.S. forces.
RIVKIN