

US issues terror alert for European cities

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The US State Department issued a terror alert Sunday for American citizens traveling anywhere in the continent of Europe, an unprecedented action that seems calculated to spread alarm without actually helping anyone avoid becoming the target of a terrorist attack. The Pentagon imposed a weekend curfew on troops at the US Air Force Base at Ramstein, Germany, ordering soldiers not to wear their uniforms off base “in response to a threat condition.”

Britain, Japan, Sweden and Canada all followed suit, issuing alerts to their own citizens who might be traveling to Europe. In each case, they cited the US alert as evidence that there was an increased danger of a terrorist attack at European transit hubs and tourist attractions.

The actual statement from the US government speaks only of “the potential for terrorist attacks,” without any specifics. “Current information suggests that Al Qaeda and affiliated organizations continue to plan terrorist attacks,” the State Department said.

Since this has likely been true of every day since Osama bin Laden issued his “declaration of war” against the United States in 1996, it is not clear that the alert has any objective basis or represents a new threat.

US citizens traveling in Europe “should take every precaution to be aware of their surroundings and to adopt appropriate safety measures to protect themselves when traveling,” the State Department said, although spokesmen, when pressed for more direction, conceded that there was nothing travelers should do except run in the other direction in the event of an explosion or outbreak of gunfire.

The US media, particularly the television news, has been full of ominous warnings of “Mumbai-style” attacks involving groups of gunmen engaging in suicide attacks on train stations, airports and tourist attractions like the Eiffel Tower. The reference is to the attacks in the Indian financial hub two years ago, during which 10 gunmen killed 166 people and wounded more than 300, using small arms and grenades at hotels and the main railway station.

The right-wing Fox News led the way with a lurid account of targets that included the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame Cathedral, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and that city’s main railway station and television tower.

One unnamed US official who confirmed the reports of impending terrorist attacks to the French news agency AFP

called the threat “credible but not specific.” He continued, “It’s unclear, for instance, precisely where something might occur. For that reason, people shouldn’t limit their thinking to the United Kingdom, France, or Germany.”

After the US warning, British officials raised their terror alert level to “high” for British citizens visiting France and Germany. Sweden’s foreign ministry issued a similar alert Monday, calling for Swedish travelers to exercise caution “in public places, in and around public buildings, at tourist attractions, on public transport and in other places with large crowds.” Last week the Swedish Security Service issued a heightened alert of an attack within Sweden, citing an unspecified “shift in activities” by Islamic groups in Sweden.

Japan’s alert, issued Monday by its Foreign Ministry, was similarly vague. A Japanese official told the British newspaper the *Guardian* “the highly unusual warning was not prompted by any specific intelligence but by the previous British and American alerts.”

The Canadian government issued a statement cautioning Canadians traveling to Europe to be vigilant, also citing the British and US warnings.

The French Foreign Ministry said the US-initiated alert was “in line with the general recommendations we ourselves make to the French population.” The government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, in deep political crisis over its attacks on the democratic rights of Roma and Muslim immigrants, as well as unpopular efforts to raise the retirement age, has embraced the anti-terror scare as a diversion.

There has been a sustained effort to whip up public fears of terrorism over the kidnapping of five French citizens in the Sahara, one of whom was reportedly executed by Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb. Bernard Squarcini, a top intelligence official, told reporters three weeks ago that threat of an attack in France “has never been greater.” Twice over the past month the government has closed the Eiffel Tower, the number one tourist destination, because of alleged terrorist threats.

Elsewhere on the European continent, however, there seems to be a more skeptical attitude to the US-inspired terror scare. The German Interior Ministry, which controls the police, said Germany has “still no concrete indications of imminent attacks,” concluding, “The government does not currently see any reason to modify its evaluation of concrete risks.”

The German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a lengthy

account of the source of the terror scare, claiming that it is a single German citizen of Pashtun descent, Ahmad Sidiqi, who was detained by US forces in Afghanistan in July and is currently in US custody. He is being interrogated by “special units of the CIA and the American military,” the magazine said. In other words, he is being tortured at a CIA “black site,” the prison on the grounds of the huge US air base at Bagram.

Sidiqi reportedly told his American interrogators that he had met with a high-level Al Qaeda operative in Pakistan and was told of instructions from bin Laden for attacks in Europe.

According to a report by CNN Monday, German officials said they had been given access to Sidiqi in Afghanistan and that he was cooperating with the US investigation. CNN reported, “Sidiqi divulges new, unverified information every day, the German intelligence sources said.” Despite these alleged revelations, German officials said there were no plans to raise the country’s security level.

The media furor in the United States has largely ignored the fact that there has not been a significant, large-scale terrorist attack in Europe since the suicide bombings on the London transport system on July 7, 2005, which killed 52 people.

As for its practical impact, the terror alert is of no use whatsoever to the 10.6 million Americans who visit Europe annually, or the hundreds of thousands who are traveling on the continent at any one time. The State Department did not issue a “terrorism warning,” a higher level of alert that would have led to widespread cancellations of travel plans.

The timing of the alert, coming less than a month before a national US election, suggests a political motivation. President Obama’s Democratic Party is trailing in many pre-election polls, and could lose control of the House of Representatives, the US Senate, or both.

In the US, administration spokesmen were at pains to present Obama as a hands-on “commander-in-chief.” The White House informed the press through email Sunday that Obama “has been following the threat information on a daily basis and was informed on the travel alert throughout.” Officials said Obama had convened meetings of his national security team on Friday night and Saturday morning, and was briefed again Sunday morning before the State Department issued its alert.

The Bush administration made heavy use of terror scares before the 2002, 2004 and 2006 elections, whether in the form of alerts like that issued Sunday by the State Department, or video and audio statements from Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda figures, usually made public the weekend before the balloting.

The heavy publicity given to the transatlantic threat is also being used to justify intensified police measures in the United States. The FBI and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sent a bulletin to local police agencies Sunday morning declaring there was no specific threat to US targets, but warning that Al Qaeda might seek to inspire those with “the ability to access the US legally” to carry out attacks using

“small arms, lone shooters and small unit tactics.”

Such a warning is so general that it could apply to almost anyone in the United States. It comes two weeks after FBI raids on the homes of antiwar activists in Minneapolis and Chicago which have no precedent since the outrages of the J. Edgar Hoover period in the 1960s and 1970s. The FBI and DHS warning urged local police to monitor individuals “loitering for no apparent reason, sketching or pace counting.”

The terror scare also takes place within the context of mounting strikes and protests across Europe against draconian austerity measures directed against the working class. European governments clearly have political reasons to seek to divert public attention away from their right-wing policies and create an atmosphere of fear and panic that can be used to justify repressive measures.

An additional motivation for the terror alert is to justify the escalating US bombing and missile attacks on targets in Pakistan, under conditions of mounting opposition both in Pakistan itself and within the American population. Media reports claim that the supposed terror plot is being prepared from Al Qaeda bases in the tribal regions of Pakistan across the border from Afghanistan, and that the sharp increase in US drone attacks in Pakistan is at least in part a response to this supposed threat.

The European governments also face mass popular opposition to their participation in or support for the US-led colonial-style war in Afghanistan.

Pakistani officials said Monday that a US drone strike killed as many as eight people of German nationality in North Waziristan, the district in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) that the US claims is the haven for Al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan after the US invasion. Missiles destroyed a building in the town of Mir Ali.



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