

# Terrorists as Transnational Actors<sup>1</sup>

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## **Terrorism Defined**

The term terrorism has become so widely used in so many contexts as to become almost meaningless. The only universally understood connotation of the term is that it is pejorative. Even terrorists don't admit to being terrorists anymore! A glance at current usage will reveal child abuse, racism and gang warfare all described as terrorism, but none of them are. If terrorism is to be analyzed in any meaningful way it must be readily distinguishable from other forms of violence and particularly from other forms of political violence. Without attempting a lengthy rationalization for the definition I employ, let me simply assert that I see terrorism as politically motivated violence directed against non-combatant or symbolic targets which is designed to communicate a message to a broader audience. The critical feature of terrorism is the deliberate targeting of innocents in an effort to convey a message to another party. This is thus essentially different from the most proximate form of political violence, the irregular warfare of the guerrilla. While it could certainly be argued that states engage in terrorism as I have defined it, my focus is on non-state actors, terrorist movements, and their relationships with states and with each other.

## **Transnational Interactions**

As a strategy to effect political change, terrorism is most often directed against domestic political structures but here I focus on the international connections between terrorists. The term transnationalism was coined by political scientists when it became clear that the prevailing state

centric paradigm was inadequate to explain both the extent and the impact of international interactions. The term transnationalism was used to denote interactions between non-state actors, that is, international interactions that are not directed by states. Transgovernmental relations on the other hand, were defined to refer to interactions between sub units of governments that were not controlled by the national executives.<sup>2</sup>

### **US Perceptions of Terrorism**

In the US, we have tended to see terrorism less as a transnational force and more as an international one. That is, we have perceived international terrorism as having been deliberately directed by governments, and usually against us. In the 1980s the prevailing image was of an extensive but covert Soviet conspiracy to undermine the West while today that image has been replaced by that of the radical Islamic fundamentalist following instructions issued in Middle Eastern capitals. International terrorism, therefore, is seen as state-sponsored terrorism, and state-sponsored terrorism, like terrorism more generally, is something only the bad guys do.

The concern with state-sponsored terrorism is such that every year the State Department is obliged to report to Congress on the patterns of global terrorism and to list those states considered to be sponsors of terrorism. Congress then imposes trade sanctions on the designated states. Currently there are seven<sup>3</sup> states on the list: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria. This list, of course, is a political instrument and reflects far more than the extent of state sponsorship of terrorism. The economies of Cuba and North Korea, for example, ensure that neither government is in any position to promote, much less fund, international terrorism. Indeed, in 1995 the North Korean government repudiated terrorism and any support for terrorism. The two governments remain on the list, ostensibly for providing safe haven to terrorists, but more likely because domestic pressure from Cuban voters in Florida and alliance relations with South Korea make removing them from the list politically difficult.

### **Terrorism as an Instrument of Foreign Policy**

A more objective assessment of the evidence might suggest that the use

of terror as an instrument of foreign policy might not be the exclusive preserve of expansionist communists or mad mullahs and might be something even impeccably liberal democracies like our own might engage in. In the 1980s, however, it was the firmly held view that the US was facing a deliberate and dedicated cadre of communists under orders from Moscow to undermine the West. This view was lent credence with the publication of a book by Claire Sterling, which asserted but failed to demonstrate the existence of a communist terrorist network.<sup>4</sup> This belief was firmly held by President Reagan and by his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig. There can be little doubt that terrorist movements did receive assistance from the Eastern bloc. Members of the German Red Army Faction clearly found refuge and financial support in East Germany. Congressional hearings in 1982 revealed the extent of training facilities provided for members of the liberation movements operating in Sub-Saharan Africa (Senate Hearings before the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism of the Committee on the Judiciary). It has not been demonstrated, however, that these training facilities necessarily translated into Soviet bloc control over these movements.

Generally speaking, financial support for a group may purchase influence, but not control, over their activities. This is equally true of relations between allies. The vast sums of money given Israel by the US means that the US government can influence Israeli policy but the US can hardly be said to control that policy. Similarly, in spite of all the aid given the mujahadeen in fighting the Russians, the US government had precious little influence on the factious Afghan fighters.

There are a large number of reasons why a state might decide to adopt the sponsorship of terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy. Until the end of the Cold War, it was widely argued that the bipolar structure of the international system lent itself to the sponsorship of terrorism. The argument was that, given the nuclear stalemate between the superpowers, direct conflict was too costly to contemplate, yet competition was inevitable. The superpowers therefore sought indirect outlets for competition. These might take the form of an arms race, of proxy wars, as in Ethiopia, or the sponsorship of terrorism, as in Southern Africa. In light of the continuation of terrorism, in spite of the transformation of the international power structure from a bipolar to a unipolar system, it is more difficult to make the argument that the use of terrorism was determined by the international distribution of power.

Nevertheless, the attractions of the sponsorship of terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy remain the same. The costs are low and if the group succeeds the benefits are high. If they fail they can easily and plausibly be disavowed.

Seen in this light, it is easier to understand how the US support for anti-Allende forces in Chile in the 1970s, support for the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s, or for anti-Castro forces throughout this period could be interpreted as the use of terror as an instrument of foreign policy which is a more neutral concept than state-sponsored terrorism. There were many good reasons why the US government wanted to undermine the regimes in Santiago, Managua and Havana and we certainly had the military prowess to bring them down. To have done so openly would have generated both an international and domestic uproar, so the government sought to do so quietly by helping local groups with the same goals as ourselves. This is very much the same rationale as that offered by Eastern bloc governments and may explain the dialogue of the deaf in this period between the right, which saw a Soviet led, communist backed, terrorist conspiracy and the left who saw a US led anti-socialist terrorist conspiracy. Terrorism, then, can be sponsored both by strong states reluctant to demonstrate their strength openly and by weak states who believe that they have no other effective weapons in their arsenal against the strong, and by liberal as well as authoritarian states.

### **Terrorists and Their Sponsors: Five Degrees of Separation**

There are very important distinctions to be drawn between different types of relationships between sponsors and terrorists. The relationships range from state direction at one end of the spectrum to simple support at the other end. The case of Iran, which is widely and rightly perceived to be the primary state sponsor of terrorism at present, illustrates several of these distinctions.

First, at the end of the continuum where state control is complete is the murder of dissidents. The State Department accuses Iran (and Iraq too) of state sponsorship of terrorism in their killing of dissidents overseas. These dissidents are either leaders of domestic opposition groups or, as in the case of Iran, officials of the Shah's regime. They are invariably murdered by members of Iranian or Iraqi intelligence services operating overseas. Among the more celebrated Iranian cases are the murder of the former Prime Minister Shahpur Bakhtiar and his

aide in Paris in 1991 and the recent (1996) discovery in Belgium of a massive mortar in a cargo of pickles packed in a ship. The ship in question belonged to a wholly owned subsidiary of Iranian intelligence and the mortar is believed to have been intended for a prominent Iranian dissident.

The second stage along the continuum of control is the recruitment and training of operatives specifically for an overseas mission. It is, of course, extremely difficult to ascertain accurate information about these cases. The three year long trial in Germany of an Iranian and four Lebanese charged with the murder of Kurdish dissidents in a Berlin restaurant in 1992 revealed the long arm of Iranian intelligence and appears to reveal this kind of case. The four accused were convicted while the prosecutors charged that Supreme leader Khamenei and President Rafsanjani approved the operation. The judge indicted the Iranian Minister of Intelligence for the crime. The murder of dissidents, while reprehensible, does not constitute terrorism *per se*. It represents a strategy of illegal state repression rather than state-sponsored terrorism. The action is highly discriminating and is carried out against an intended target by, what amounts to, an arm of the government and so it is quite distinct from the randomness associated with terrorism.

The third step along the continuum is when a government closely controls a terrorist group and directs their actions. There are few cases in which the control is complete and when it is, it is more a case of the use of intelligence services. Nevertheless, there are terrorist movements in the Middle East, albeit not many, which appear to have very little independence from their sponsors. Two such cases are the Saiqa Palestinian group and the PLFP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command) which are essentially directed by their main sponsor, Syria. The PLFP-GC's leader, Ahmad Jibril is a former captain in the Syrian Army. The movement has its headquarters in Damascus and is heavily dependent on Syria for financial and logistical support.

The next and fourth level of control is by far the most common. It is when a government provides training, financing, and safe haven for an autonomous terrorist group. This is the case, for example, for most of the Palestinian groups operating in the Middle East. Many of these groups jealously guard their independence. They accept assistance from several sponsors, in part to avoid being exclusively dependent on any one sponsor. Most groups, like Hamas, try to supplement their

government funding, in this case from Iran, with support from private benefactors in places like Saudi Arabia and from Palestinian expatriates. In some cases groups accept help from sworn enemies. The PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party), for example, accepts support from both Iran and Iraq, as well as Syria. When one of these groups commits an atrocity there is a tendency to blame one of the sponsoring states. While the state may indeed be pleased by the action, they may very well not have been aware of it in advance. In this case the sponsoring state may be responsible for the action in a moral sense, in having supported the perpetrators, but they are not directly responsible for the action.

Throughout its years of leadership of the Western alliance the US has experienced frustration at the fact that its enemies invariably exaggerate its influence over its allies. The US can try to persuade but cannot dictate the behavior of its allies, no matter what its enemies think. In the same way, the US tends to exaggerate the influence of the states on the actions of the terrorists they sponsor. Certainly the states have the ability to hurt the movements by denying them support but they are rarely in a position to dictate to them. Usually they do not need to. In February 1996, for example, the Iranian Vice President met with Hamas leaders in Damascus immediately after several bombings in Israel, and praised their successful efforts. A week later, Hamas claimed responsibility for two more bombings. Both Iran and Hamas share a virulent antipathy to the state of Israel, and there is no need for one to direct the operations of the other.

The fifth and final step on the continuum of state control is when the sponsoring state decides that the actions of a terrorist movement will serve its ends. The state then supports the group financially because it identifies its interests with that of the group. The support of Lybian leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi, for the IRA (Irish Republican Army) can be seen in this light. Qaddafi actually knew very little about the situation in Northern Ireland, or about the campaign waged by the IRA. He nevertheless provided them with training facilities, financial support and several ships full of weaponry, because he knew that they were operating against Britain. His goal was to punish Britain for its collaboration in the US bombing of Tripoli. His support of the IRA was a means to do so. IRA acceptance of that support in no way led them to alter their military strategy.

### Exporting Revolution

An undifferentiated view of state sponsorship of terrorism, which fails to appreciate these important distinctions in the relationships, is unlikely to develop an understanding of the motivations underlying transnational terrorism and hence is unlikely to develop an effective counter-terrorist strategy. There is another aspect of state-sponsored terrorism and this is one which does set Iran apart from other countries on the US government's list of state sponsors of terrorism. That is the Iranian efforts since the successful revolution in 1979 to export their revolution overseas. Religion has long been a powerful transnational force in international relations. It has refused to respect national boundaries and generated centuries of jurisdictional disputes between secular and clerical leaderships. The Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shiite Muslim cleric who led the Iranian revolution, provided a theological justification for fundamentalist terrorism. He argued that Islam was threatened with destruction and that Shiite believers were obliged to fight in its defence.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Iranian-sponsored terrorism is not solely or even primarily directed against the West, but rather is directed against surrounding Gulf states, particularly Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The Western victims of Iranian-sponsored terrorism have often been incidental. Either caught in the embassy at the onset of the revolution or kidnapped by the Iranian backed Hizballah group in Lebanon or victims of Iranian backed terror in Israel. The rhetoric denouncing the US as 'the Great Satan' notwithstanding, Iran has not, in fact, led a terrorist war against the West.

Iran's support for terrorism has been closely linked to support for Shiite opposition groups in nearby Gulf states. When in 1987, for example, a Kuwaiti Shiite bombed a Kuwaiti oil installation or when a Bahraini engineer tried to sabotage Bahrain's oil refinery Iran was discovered to be behind them. In the late 1980s there was a wave of terrorist activity in Kuwait backed by Shiite terrorists groups backed by Iran. At one point a Kuwaiti airplane was hijacked in an effort to secure the release of 17 members of an Iranian backed group jailed for terrorist offenses. This, of course, is precisely the kind of activity to which the West has been exposed for years and it is clearly mistaken to think that it is directed only against the West. In 1988 Iran adjusted its sights and began to focus on Saudi Arabia after the death of 257 Iranian pilgrims making the *hajj*. Iran publicly called for the overthrow of the Saudi

ruling family. Shiite Muslims were recruited and trained by Iran and carried out a wave of terrorist attacks often directed against Saudi officials or the Saudi airline. Harsh repression by the Saudi authorities was unable to eliminate these incidents.

The widely held view that Middle Eastern terrorism is directed exclusively against the West is misplaced. Iranian backed groups have sought to export the verities of the Iranian revolution to surrounding states, while radical Islamic groups such as al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad in Egypt have sought to overthrow the secular leadership of their own government.

### **Terrorist Networks**

The relationships between states and terrorist movements do not correspond directly to the pure form of transnationalism as defined above because they do include a state as part of the equation. Nor do they correspond to transgovernmentalism in that they are not connections between subgroups of governments. Rather they reflect an under-theorized hybrid type of transnationalism between a state and an autonomous movement. In the cases where these movements are directly controlled by the sponsoring government there is no need to supplement the traditional state centric paradigm. But in the cases in which the movements are independent or quasi-independent of any particular state they do suggest yet another level of international interaction. Moreover, operations at this level have clearly exercised an independent impact on state action.

Terrorist movements demonstrate a more pure form of transnational interaction in the relationships they form with each other. Insofar as terrorist movements cohere and form linkages such that they operate together and have an independent impact on state policy then indeed they are transnational actors. It goes without saying that, given the clandestine nature of most terrorist groups, it is not very easy to find evidence to demonstrate the extent of these linkages. Nevertheless, the evidence that exists points to linkages between groups occurring for a variety of reasons, sometimes a shared ideology, sometimes a shared enemy or sometimes, simply, shared training facilities.

The left wing social revolutionary movements that operated in Europe in the '70s and '80s, like the German Red Army Faction, the Italian Red Brigades and the French Direct Action, had much in



common. They were drawn from similar strata in society, the disaffected children of privilege, and were motivated by a desire to destroy what they perceived to be the corruption of contemporary capitalism and replace it with a new but ill-defined order based on Marxist-Leninist principles. They formed linkages based on ideological affinity establishing anti-imperialist fronts which were facilitated by their geographic proximity.<sup>5</sup>

Other less likely groups formed transnational links for the simple reason that they shared an enemy, usually the US. The co-operation between several Palestinian and European groups can be seen in this light. Palestinian groups offered financial support to groups like the Italian Red Brigades if they in turn would step up their attacks on US and NATO targets. These linkages were driven less by ideological affinity and more by the imperatives of the age old political dictum, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Members of terrorist groups often initially made contact with each other during sessions in training camps in the Middle East and North Africa. This shared training both facilitated the formation of personal contacts and facilitated joint operations due to shared training with particular weapons and operating procedures.

Dramatic evidence of transnational collaboration between terrorists is to be found by simply examining some of the personnel involved in several celebrated terrorist escapades. Members of the German Red Army Faction (RAF) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) appear to have been particularly adept at forming international terrorist teams. The RAF participated in the kidnapping of 11 OPEC oil ministers in Vienna in 1975. The following year they participated in the Palestinian hijacking of an Air France airliner to Entebbe, Uganda, while in 1977 they again collaborated in a hijacking, this time of a Lufthansa plane to Mogadishu. The extent of the international connections were also evident in the Lod massacre in 1972. The attack in a Tel Aviv airport was carried out by members of the Japanese Red Army who had earlier joined with the PFLP in a 'Declaration of World War'. Members of the JRA subsequently took refuge in North Korea.

Transnational relations between terrorist movements are not confined to Europe and the Middle East. An explosion under an auto repair shop in Managua, Nicaragua in 1993 revealed what one diplomat at the scene described as: 'a one stop shopping center for Latin terrorists'.<sup>6</sup> Quite aside from the very extensive arsenal including tons

of explosives, hundreds of assault rifles and tens of surface to air missiles, the cache revealed an extensive filing system documenting the collaboration of Argentinian, Basque, Canadian, Chilean, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran and Uruguayan terrorists. Besides the treasure trove of hundreds of passports and identification papers the files provided detailed documentation of observations on scores of wealthy Latin American businessmen, ten of whom had already been kidnapped. Those convicted in one of the kidnappings, that of the Brazilian supermarket chain owner Abilio Diniz, included a multinational group of Argentinians, a Brazilian, two Canadians and five Chileans.

Historically, shared support from Cuba served to forge international links between terrorist groups in Latin American but the Managua explosion demonstrates that the groups co-operated in the absence of Cuban support. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that even with this massive arsenal and with all their documentation these groups are known only to have succeeded in kidnapping ten wealthy Latin Americans. Like most other terrorists, they have not, in fact, posed a vital security threat to the countries in which they operate.

### **Conclusion**

International links between terrorist movements take many forms. Some are directed by states, some are independent of states, some have state involvement. The transnational links between terrorist groups are so varied that they cannot be said to be orchestrated even at a regional level, much less at a global level, by any one power. These findings have implications both for policy-makers and for academics. For academics, insofar as many of these links reflect a hybrid form of interaction between transnationalism and transgovernmentalism they suggest an under-theorized area of international interaction. For policy-makers, the fear of the spectre of state-sponsored terrorism replacing the global Soviet threat to our interests is clearly misplaced. Policy-makers as well as academics would do well to draw critical distinctions between the relationships of movements and those who assist them because the most effective counter-terrorist strategy will be one directed to the source of terrorism.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in the Fall 1998 edition of the Harvard undergraduate magazine, the *Harvard International Review*.
2. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye (eds) *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1970).
3. United States Department of State, Patterns of Global Terrorism, April 1999.
4. Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network: The Secret War of International Terrorism* (New York: Reader's Digest Press 1981).
5. Yonah Alexander and Dennis Pluchinsky, *Europe's Red Terrorists: The Fighting Communist Organizations* (London: Frank Cass 1992).
6. *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1993.

