

# Middle Eastern Terrorism in the International Arena

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Over the past few years, the features of international terrorism originating in the Middle East have been changing. While several factors have served to restrain the spillover of violence from conflict arenas in the region to the international sphere, a new threat has evolved, the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in the summer of 1998 comprise a reflection of the developing source of concern. The attackers belonged to a terror apparatus established by the Saudi billionaire Usama Bin Laden, whose objective is, at least initially, to free the Saudi peninsula from American presence, and to free 'Palestine' from Zionist presence. Bin Laden's apparatus is affiliated with practically every organization and movement fueled by Islamic ideology, and his name has been mentioned repeatedly during recent years, in connection with terrorist attacks carried out against American targets in the Middle East. Beginning in the early 1990s, Islamic fanatics who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan alongside the Mujahiddin have been incorporated into Islamic movements throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, and Bin Laden's apparatus is part of this phenomenon.

The 'Afghans' in general, and in particular those affiliated with Bin Laden, enjoy freedom from restrictions that have limited the activities of most other known terrorist organizations and state agencies involved in terrorism. First, Bin Laden's organization and its affiliated groups are unencumbered by considerations of risk assessment, or by concerns about the public image of their struggle - two elements with a strong impact on

organizations and movements seeking political power through popular support. Second, in contrast to terrorist organizations that depend on state-sponsorship, the Bin Laden apparatus is financially and operatively independent. Hence, it is not constrained by the fear of retaliation, a cost that a state sponsor of terrorism must be willing to bear. Third, unlike states that incorporate the tactic of terrorism within their overall political strategy, this apparatus is unhindered by considerations, which tend to restrict terrorist activity by state agents in the international arena.

For these reasons, the activities of the 'Afghans' in the international terror arena, are not a direct continuation or extension of Middle Eastern terror as manifested in the seventies and eighties. Moreover, the 'Afghans' do not reflect the overall pattern of Middle Eastern international terrorism in the nineties. Rather, the phenomenon constitutes a new threat, whose greatest significance is derived from the combination of relative freedom of operation, and direct access to resources.

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Interestingly enough, this evolving threat has developed against the background of an overall decrease in terrorist activity in the international arena. Annual reports of the US Department of State define international terror as terrorist attacks involving citizens or territories of more than one state. According to these reports, the scope of such attacks including those that were aborted has dropped in recent years. Between 1991 and 1997, the number of attacks committed annually ranged

from 300 to 400, compared with 500 to nearly 700 per year during the preceding decade. It is important to note that the majority of attacks were aimed at foreign targets within the borders of the terrorists' home countries; only a minority took place within the borders of a third state. Significantly, while a decline in the overall number of attacks was recorded, there was an increase in attacks with multiple victims.

The decrease in the number of attacks may have been induced by a combination of circumstances, including security and diplomatic counter-measures, which have contributed to lowering the expectations of organizations and states regarding the benefits they might derive from sponsoring international terrorism. These factors explain not only the recent decline in the extent of international terrorist activity, but also, at least partially, the enormous gap which has prevailed over the years, between the volume of domestic terrorism worldwide and that of international terrorism.

This gap is especially significant in the context of the Middle East. Terrorism originating from the region comprises a major component of the challenge posed by international terrorism, especially as perceived by the West. This feature of Middle Eastern terrorism in the international arena has historical roots: The violent struggle conducted by Palestinian organizations against Israeli and other states since the late 1960s, took place in most cases within the jurisdiction of western countries. During the 1980s, this threat was coupled by acts of violence



committed by organizations, fueled by both Sunni and Shi'ite Islamic ideology, against targets of western states. The support that Middle Eastern states gave to these organizations, and states' direct involvement in terrorism through their own organizations, have added to the degree of threat and made the formulation of appropriate counter-measure a highly complex task.

However, a number of factors have several to prevent, or mitigate, the direct translation of ideological commands, political conflicts and social tensions, into acts of terrorism in the international arena. These mitigating factors pertain primarily to the motivations and objectives of the organizations and movements involved.

### **Palestinian International Terrorism**

A substantive decline has been recorded in recent years in the scope of Palestinian international terrorism. It is true that Islamic and nationalist Palestinian organizations that oppose the more moderate path chosen by the mainstream of the PLO, are affiliated with terrorist infrastructures located outside the immediate area of the conflict. These extra-regional infrastructures are even supported by state governments. It should be noted, however, that Palestinian terrorist activity conducted outside Israeli controlled territory, served as a response to the constraints on conducting the struggle within the area of the conflict itself. Unable to achieve their national goals through a popular struggle in the territories, international terrorism served to mobilize world-wide support for the

Palestinian cause and to exert international pressure on Israel. Over the years, however, organizations affiliated with the 'Rejection Front', which opposed the policies advocated by the mainstream of the PLO, became the major players in the arena. The aim of international terrorism, in their eyes, was to marshal public support against the PLO, in order to prevent diplomatic negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The outbreak of the intifada shifted the focal point of the struggle further away from the international to the domestic arena, and the peace process that followed changed the very essence of the struggle. In contrast to the past, when acts of violence were perpetrated in order to force the international community to take notice of the conflict, in recent years its attention has been obtained, with remarkable success, through public protest and diplomacy. These developments have led to a decline in the prestige of violence exercised in the international arena, as a means to advance the Palestinian cause.

### **Islamic International Terrorism**

In contrast to the Palestinian national struggle, the social and political struggle of Islamic forces have focused on the domestic arena. Even when faced with increasing opposition from forces at home, Islamic movements, concerned with social affairs and internal politics, did not turn the international arena their main battlefield.

Foreign countries, especially west European states, have become centers of Middle Eastern militants, and of Islamic

movements in particular. The 'host' countries allowed communal and religious activity to take place, while taking a calculated risk that such concessions would reduce the motivation of radical elements to act against them. However, host countries have experienced waves of terrorism committed within their borders by militant Palestinians as well as Muslims, for whom freedom of movement is a major operational consideration. In any event, international terrorism was not a direct product of the presence Islamic communities in the hosting western states. The leaderships of these communities have by and large refrained from encouraging acts of violence in the host state, in order to avoid provoking the local governments into limiting their freedom to organize and function. The involvement of the communities in fund raising and mobilization of public support was not intended to generate support for international terrorism. Rather, the resources raised are intended primarily to support the communities themselves and to transfer funds to areas of the struggle in Middle Eastern states. For example, in western Europe and the US, contributions are solicited by organizations close to Hamas, and are transferred to Hamas institutions in Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.

### **State Sponsored International Terrorism**

The involvement of Middle Eastern states - primarily Iran, Syria and Sudan - in international terrorism, is related to both the Palestinian struggle and Islamic-





inspired militancy. Governments that sponsor opposition forces in other states contribute significantly to the capacity of these forces to organize, mobilize popular support and assert themselves in various facets of the struggle. However, as a general rule, states cannot genuinely create militant organizations and movements in foreign countries, nor can they determine the strategic priorities of existing movements. Hence, the logistic and operational support provided by foreign governments is not the sole explanation for the prevalence of terrorist activity in the international arena.

Frequently, terrorist organizations attack foreign targets in return for the support they receive. Operational cooperation between the Lebanese Hizballah and other Islamic groups with the Iranian government illustrate this point. Yet, the violent activities of state supported organizations in the international arena, like the attacks perpetrated by Palestinian 'rejectionist' organizations in the 1970s and the 1980s, were primarily rooted in the domestic constraints that prevented them from establishing operational capabilities locally. Moreover, states which support Islamic militant opposition forces in the region, usually prefer that these groups consolidate their power and influence in

their homelands. Iran's abortive attempt to export the revolution to other countries illustrated the difficulties involved in attaining this goal, and in any case, that it is unlikely to be accomplished through international terrorism.

Terrorist action carried out by government agents is another aspect of state-sponsored terrorism. The dynamics and cost/benefit calculations underlying such activities, however, are distinct from those of popular movements and organizations involved in international terrorism. The activity of government agents is first and foremost a function of the extent to which the responsible government is willing to bear the consequences of their involvement in terrorism. Reactions to state involvement in international terrorism have ranged from economic and diplomatic sanctions to military retaliation. Thus blatant Libyan and Syrian involvement in international terrorism resulted in economic and diplomatic sanctions imposed by Western nations. More rarely, such activities resulted in a military response. The air attack carried out by the US against Libya in 1986, and the attack against targets in Sudan and Afghanistan in 1988 following the terrorist incidents in Africa, are examples for this infrequent course of counter-action.

These factors serve to explain the decline in recent years in international terrorism originating in the Middle East. However, international terrorism continues to pose an immediate problem and a future threat. First, terrorism often proves a convenient option. It is frequently the most effective alternative, in the absence of political influence and military power. Since international terrorism is usually implemented when domestic activity becomes too dangerous or ceases to be an option, it is not inconceivable that organizations and movements that are currently focusing their struggle on the domestic front, will export their efforts abroad in the future - if and when circumstances change. Organizations such as the Bin Laden apparatus serve as an exception to this rule, since for them the international arena is not an alternative, but rather a strategic and ideological preference.

Another factor which makes international terrorism a convenient option, is relative logistical simplicity. The attacks in Africa last summer highlight the relative ease with which terrorist groups can reach their targets, even those considered to be well protected, such as American facilities overseas. One should also bear in mind that the attacks on the US embassies in Africa were carried out with conventional means. While it has recently become fashionable to direct the debate on terrorism toward unconventional threats, these attacks illustrate that conventional terrorism has by no means been exhausted. ■