

An Overview of Terrorism

Terrorist activities occur in many, if not all, parts of the world to some degree. This article is limited in its discussion to mainly terrorist involvement in the United States and the Middle East due to terrorist groups from that area and their dislike for Americans and acts against our country. In narrowing this focus, it is important that readers are aware of the many other destructive forces of terrorism throughout the world, which will not be extensively discussed here.

There are many differing views about what terrorism is and its beginnings. The term is used loosely in our society today. However, most experts agree that it is not senseless violence but is violence motivated by some religious or political purpose.

Many disagree on a definition for terrorism. "The State Department defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.'"¹ However, "no definition of terrorism can possibly cover all the varieties of terrorism that have appeared throughout history: peasant wars and labor disputes and brigandage have been accompanied by systematic terror, and the same is true of general wars, civil wars, revolutionary wars, wars of national liberation, and resistance movements against foreign occupiers."²

"Paul Pillar, a former deputy chief of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, argues that there are four key elements of terrorism." It is premeditated, political, aimed at civilians and carried out by subnational groups.³

Early terrorism dates back all the way to 66-73 AD up to the present and includes groups in most areas of the world including but not limited to parts of South America, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa and the United States.

Many times, terrorist groups in these countries will terrorize other countries where they don't reside to avoid arrest. Prior to the 1960s, they operated in their own country. Terrorism is the "use of covert violence by a group for political ends, is usually directed against a government, but it is also used against other ethnic groups, classes or parties." "Terrorists seek to cause political, social and economic disruption, and for this purpose frequently engage in planned or indiscriminate murder."⁴ In order to carry out these objectives, terrorists need to be highly organized and well funded.

Some terrorist groups are small and decreasing in size but some are very large with thousands of members like the Tamil Tigers (a separatist group fighting the government of Sri Lanka) and the Algerian Islamists. Contemporary terrorism is international: planned in one country and carried out in another, financed through various means,



Photo courtesy of cbp.gov

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involving people living in and from diverse countries, and utilizing weaponry manufactured from several countries.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this type of terrorism is the raid and kidnapping at the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1975. It was "planned in the Middle East by a Venezuelan (Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, a.k.a. 'Carlos-the-Jackal'), financed by the Libyan government, and carried out in Vienna by German, Palestinian, and Latin American terrorists using American and Czech arms."⁵

Financing Terrorism

Nineteenth Century terrorists usually had little money; however, today's terrorists often have very large cash flows accumulated through the drug trade (often referred to as narcoterrorism) or financing from governments (state-sponsored terrorism). These types of funding allow terrorist groups to commit larger scale terrorist attacks because of the heavier financing brought in through these means. They often receive support from sympathizers too through monetary means, intelligence gathering and/or physical laborers that assist them in carrying out their activities.



Terrorist groups have substantial cash flows, aided frequently by the drug trade and financial support from governments.

Narcoterrorism

Some terrorist groups are supported by countries that use the drug trade including Afghanistan's former Taliban rule (that protected al-Qaida), Syria and Lebanon. These groups include Hezbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Hamas Palestinian group.⁶

Terrorist groups that are directly involved in narcoterrorism include the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN); United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC); a Peruvian leftist group called Shining Path; a Sri Lankan separatist group called the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; Hezbollah; a Marxist separatist group called Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); "the Real IRA, an Irish Republican Army (IRA) splinter group;" and a Spanish separatist group called Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA). "In 2000, Americans spent almost \$63 billion on illegal narcotics." Because the addictive nature of these drugs can weaken our society, Osama bin Laden has reportedly advocated their trafficking to the United States and other Western countries.⁷

State-Sponsored Terrorism

Cuba, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria are accused by the State Department of sponsoring terrorism with Iran being the "primary state sponsor of terrorism today." Groups funded by these countries include Hezbollah, the Abu Nidal Organization and the Japanese Red Army. "Some experts considered Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to be a state that was, to some degree, run by a terrorist group."⁸

One of the highest income terrorist groups is Fatah, located in the Middle East. In 1976 Fatah had an income of 150-200 million U.S. dollars. Conversely, a Syrian spokesman estimated it to be even higher at around \$240 million. It is important to keep in mind, however that these numbers are only estimates and could be exaggerated. Either way, millions of dollars are invested in or used by various terrorist groups throughout the world.⁹

Terrorist Weaponry and Activities

Much of the financing used by terrorists is to procure weapons. The weapons used by terrorist groups include daggers and pistols; time-bombs; explosives including dynamite, hand grenades and letter-bombs (which were actually first used by Russian terrorists as early as the 1880s); book-bombs; cars; submachine-guns; various firearms; automatic and semi-automatic weapons; missile launchers; anti-tank rockets; and car-bombs. Ironically, the first use of an aircraft for terrorism occurred in January 1974 when the Irish Republican Army dropped two bombs from a stolen helicopter.¹⁰ However, hijackings of airplanes can be dated back as far as 1931.

Terrorists use these weapons to carry out their activities. These activities include assassinations, injuries on suspected spies, bank robberies, robberies of armored cash transport vehicles, liberating fellow terrorists from prison, harboring hostages, kidnappings for political purposes and ransom money, hijackings (especially of airplanes), and attacking or seizing embassies. They'll use hostages to control governments because it places the government in a compromising situation because of their responsibility to protect their innocent citizens.

In carrying out these activities, terrorists rely heavily on supports to gain intelligence. Individuals such as postal workers and other government employees, police officers, airport employees, lawyers and judges can be especially helpful in intelligence gathering. Terrorists frequently disguise themselves and have sympathizers.



Terrorists use various types of weapons to carry out their objectives of fear, destruction and death. Some believe terrorists could target bridges to disrupt the flow of people and the economy.

Profile of a Terrorist

So, what causes these individuals to carry out such violence among the innocent? Do they fit a certain personality? These questions puzzle researchers as they've tried to come up with a definitive terrorist personality. This objective is futile given the expanse of countries involved in terrorism over a very long duration of time besides the differing objectives of various terrorist groups.

Although there is no specific mold terrorists fit into, many terrorists have deep religious convictions, which frequently "motivate" their actions. They also frequently have close family ties and seem to lead "normal" lives. Others are very extreme and psychopathological. Most are very young males, but terrorists are certainly not limited to only the young or those that are male. Women are used because they seem less threatening and/or suspicious. Pregnant women make a particularly good smokescreen and have been used by terrorist groups in the past.

Most researchers agree that terrorists are not crazy but are very focused and sure of what they are doing. In fact many theorists agree, "the common characteristic of terrorists is their normality."¹¹ While there is not a uniform terrorist mindset, many believe they share similar personality traits including: action-oriented, aggressive people who seek excitement and stimulus. Many destructive charismatics place all the blame for their own problems outside themselves to other people. This creates a philosophy of: "It's not us — it's them; they are the cause of our problems."¹² Studies have also suggested that many terrorists have failures personally, vocationally and educationally.

Some researchers feel that the resort to violence is a choice for terrorists and not a result of unintended outcomes of psychological or social factors, arguing that terrorists feel that terrorism is their only choice for accomplishing their objectives due to the failure of other activities. Some argue that terrorism is in response by a group to perceived opportunities. Other theorists argue that political groups organize when their values are threatened.¹³

On the reverse of terrorism being a willful choice based on perceived alternatives there is the idea that "political terrorists are driven to commit acts of violence as a consequence of psychological forces, and that their special psycho-logic is constructed to rationalize acts they are psychologically compelled to commit."¹⁴



April 26, 1995 -- FEMA News Photo
"Search and Rescue crews work to save those trapped beneath the debris, following the Oklahoma City bombing."

There are three main reasons for the weakness and vulnerability of the type of organization likely to turn to terrorism. First, terrorists' ideals are usually so extreme that most members of society disagree with them. Second, terrorists may have difficulty in mobilizing enough support to carry out their activities. Third, weaknesses of dissident organizations are specific to repressive states. Terrorists are generally impatient and act based on this impatience and time constraints.¹⁵

Once individuals join terrorist groups, there is a tremendous amount of group pressure — the pressure to be loyal to the group and to commit violent acts or face consequences. It is further complicated when terrorist groups are state-supported or state-directed. The group becomes in effect a paramilitary unit under government control.¹⁶

Specific training of terrorists involves a moral disengagement to overcome the moral standards that govern their conduct. This moral standard must be overcome in order to permit a person to cross the line. Many times this is accomplished with some religious rhetoric that allows individuals to feel that their actions are deemed appropriate because they serve a moral purpose and fulfill some higher honorable purpose.

Most moral behavior is deemed non-situational, meaning if one believes it is wrong to have premarital sex for example, it is wrong in any situation. There are no times it would be warranted OK. However, in a terrorist's mindset of moral disengagement, they allow situations to control their morals.

Terrorists are convinced in their training that it is moral to kill. Victims are also viewed as inhuman and are given labels. Comparisons of perceived threats from the victims also enable terrorists to justify their actions.

Often terrorists feel they are helping some "greater" cause and are motivated by their beliefs and opportunities for financial or political gain. Through these methods of moral disengagement, terrorists feel morally justified and even dutifully responsible for carrying out acts of terrorism against others.¹⁷

Fear: The Terrorists' Weapon

Whatever the reason for why terrorists act the way they do, their main goal is to promote fear among the public at large. There is the real concern of an attack on one of our centralized service systems. An attack on this scale (taking place on one side of the United States) could indeed affect nearly everyone within the United States despite where they reside. These systems include the food we eat, water we drink, medicine we take, transportation we use, communications we rely on and so forth.

We may never encounter any of these things but that is part of the problem with terrorism. It is extremely difficult to know or predict this type of occurrence or even the possibility of being a victim. People fear terrorism more than real dangers because they feel they have control over those things. For example, they can prepare for a natural disaster and frequently have warnings of such more than terrorist acts.

There are several factors that enable terrorism to accomplish its goal for widespread public fear including:

- Terrorist acts are unpredictable.
- Terrorist acts have high consequences of death.
- Terrorist acts instill uncontrollability for being a victim.
- Terrorist acts that affect central service systems affect the lives of many people and not just those directly around the site of the attack.

While people are more likely to be attacked by someone they know or to be a victim of urban crime more than terrorism, there is great fear among people due to these factors.¹⁸

Terrorists utilize the electronic media to achieve their purposes of intimidating the public and gaining support and sympathy for their actions and positions.

Terrorism and the Media

Terrorism differs from other types of crime because of its purpose, which is psychological. For example, when a thief steals something, it is with one objective. That is to get the item. The terrorist seeks much more than that — fear and publicity.

Terrorists live for propaganda and try to gain popular support. Hostage tapes are used to facilitate propaganda. They shamelessly use the media for this purpose, which could explain why



April 26, 1995 -- FEMA News Photo
Terrorism comes in various forms, by those within and without the country, citizen and non-citizen alike. Pictured above is the "devastation following the

terrorist activities occur in certain countries. There are times when so much media time is used to cover terrorist activities that other world events don't get covered. International news is distorted when so much time is devoted to covering a terrorist activity. "There is a very fine line between reporting and instigating murder."¹⁹

Terrorists have targeted the media at times by killing reporters and sending Anthrax to several newsrooms. Additionally, terrorists sometimes gear their terrorism to maximize television coverage based on locations that are easily viewed and of national importance. If some media stations decide not to broadcast certain terrorist videos, the World Wide Web has become another outlet and tool for terrorists in letting their voice be heard.

Some argue that broadcasting our country's vulnerabilities gives too much information to terrorists and aids them in future attacks. For example, with the electricity blackout affecting New York and surrounding areas, some networks heavily broadcasted the weaknesses of our electricity system and made almost constant references to its vulnerability and the possibility of future hacker/terrorist attacks to cause a major disruption to our way of life. Some news organizations feel it is important to focus on these weaknesses to send a message to the government to do something about it. After hearing both sides of this argument, one may be inclined to ask: "Does it truly help our country to make necessary changes to vulnerabilities or does it simply aid the terrorist in understanding our weakest points — almost inviting them to come attack us?"



An attack on one of our centralized service systems, like electricity, could have a dramatic effect on the American way of life as seen during the widespread electricity outages in the Eastern United States and outages caused by natural disasters.

Too frequently the media focuses on sensationalism and looks for and reports on violence. "They have also contributed to the spread of terrorism, though it is difficult to assess with any certainty to what degree they have done so. These observations apply far more to television than to the printed media, and these trends have been more pronounced in American television than in that of any other country."²⁰

Carlos Marighella, a Brazilian communist who left his party to become a terrorist, shaped many of the strategies and methods of modern terrorism. "Marighella emphasized the propaganda effect of terrorism, describing how terrorists might manipulate the media to demoralize and undermine the government:

"Airplanes diverted in flight by revolutionary action, moving ships and trains assaulted and seized — all can be used solely for their propaganda effect.

"The war of nerves, or psychological warfare, is an aggressive technique based on the direct or indirect use of mass means of communication and news transmitted orally in order to demoralize the government.

"In psychological warfare, the government is always at a disadvantage since it imposes censorship on the media and winds up in a defensive position by not allowing anything against it to filter through."²¹

There are some serious dilemmas about the role television plays in fueling terrorist activities. Both arguments have legitimacy with no obvious compromise. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President

Carter's national security adviser says the negative effects of television coverage of terrorism include:

"First, television tends to transform what is essentially a political issue into a personal drama. It prevents the government from dealing with the situation as a political problem and forces it to think of it as a personal problem.

"Second, television becomes a medium for conveying the kidnapers' demands and for permitting them to appeal directly to the American people over the heads of the government for the acceptance of the demands. It thus enhances the bargaining capacity of the kidnapers.

"And, third, television humanizes the enemy, thereby also making it more difficult for the government to respond firmly."²² The coverage and outcome of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985 clearly demonstrate Brzezinski's points.

On the other side of the issue are some valid points that demonstrate the negative outcome of government control of this type of media coverage.

"First, if the media did not objectively, accurately, and credibly report terrorist acts, the public might lose confidence in both the press and the government.

"Second, attempts to impose media blackouts could easily lead terrorists to escalate the levels of violence to attract greater attention.

"Third, since a major goal of terrorists is to undermine authority and constitutional values, the limitation of free speech would be a victory for terrorism."²³

Types of Terrorism

There are several different types of terrorism. Two of the most prominent forms are nationalist and religious in addition to state-sponsored terrorism, which has already been discussed. Other forms are left-wing, right-wing and anarchist. An example of right-wing terrorism is found right here in the United States — the Ku Klux Klan. "Klan violence qualifies as terrorism because it is systematic, and because its objective is basically political — the preservation by one group of its power over another."²⁴

Many nationalist terrorists consider themselves "freedom fighters" and not terrorists.

They consist of individuals that are seeking to separate themselves from their nation by creating their own state. Due to this "freedom fighter" status, they frequently get a lot of international sympathy. Nationalist terrorist groups include the Irish Republican Army, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Spain's Basque Fatherland and Liberty, and Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party.²⁵

Nationalist Terrorism Profile

Yasir Arafat and a group called Fatah, which means "conquest"²⁶ assumed control of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1969 after raising money for his Fatah friends, which allowed him to create its first military unit. Most of the group's hatred is aimed at Israel.



Terrorists rely heavily on supports to gain intelligence and may seek to gain sympathizers among police officers; lawyers; judges; and government, airport or postal employees.

Yasir Arafat, the son of a wealthy textile merchant and related through his mother to Haf Amin al-Husseini (an openly pro-Nazi Moslem leader) studied engineering and became active in politics while he attended the University of Cairo. This is where he became friends with members of Fatah.

Ways to Fight Terrorism

1. **Crack down on unsafe airports.** This idea mostly focuses on international airports, particularly those involved in hijackings. It is notable that since 9/11 we are cracking down on our own to prevent another occurrence such as we had.
2. **Tighten airport security.** This is not a new idea. Interestingly enough, talk of putting armed federal marshals aboard U.S. flights was proposed by President Reagan. However, it has been proven that this is not a definite solution to the problem of hijackings. A Jordanian Boeing 727 was hijacked in Beirut and had eight sky marshals on board.
3. **Protect terrorist targets.** This includes many places of continued attacks.
4. **Expand intelligence gathering.** Many attacks have been thwarted because of proper intelligence gathering. Unfortunately with the rise of terrorism in the Middle East, the U.S. took a heavy blow to intelligence gathering in the 1980s. There were more than 35 agents killed by terrorists at the American Embassy in Beirut in 1983. There was also the problem of some CIA agents leaking intelligence to the press to show how important they were. In addition, some of the terrorist groups including Islamic Holy War, Hizbullah and Al Dawa Islamiya have separated themselves by not sharing information with all terrorists.
5. **Train for trouble.** This involves having a crisis plan in place in case of disasters. Many savvy companies on public relations have implemented such plans and been very grateful they had when something occurred, while others failed and failed miserably without such a plan. The government should be as savvy and has come a long way in recent years in preparing and planning for potential attacks.

[Source: Steven Anzovin, ed., *Terrorism (The Reference Shelf) Volume 58 Number 3* (New York: The H W Wilson Company 1986)]

Arafat sought diplomacy and was granted observer status by the United Nations. It is interesting to note that "the PLO acts as a cover organization for at least nine groups of terrorists."²⁷

One such group thought by some to be controlled by the PLO is "Black September." Some, however, feel that it is not run by them but is made up of dangerous militants from Libya. Either way, it became very dangerous. The first act committed by this group was the assassination of Jordan's Prime Minister in 1971. It then killed two Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics and captured nine others. These other nine were eventually killed when German security forces tried to free the hostages. Other activities include the seizing of the American embassy in Khartoum and raiding airports.

Another dangerous nationalist terrorist group is the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) led by George Habash. Beginning with attacks in 1968, their primary targets were hijackings of airlines and attacks at airports.²⁸

Religious Terrorism Profile

Religious terrorists "use violence to further what they see as divinely commanded purposes." Religious terrorists are often deemed more lethal and dangerous than the nationalist terrorist because their victims can be anyone not of their faith. Their victim is thus not just a nation but includes far more individuals. "The religious terrorist often sees violence as an end in itself, as a divinely inspired way of serving a higher cause."²⁹

Religious terrorism is frequently referred to as "holy" or "sacred" terror. It is important to mention that this type of terrorism is not confined to Islam (Muslim religion) but has also been manifested by Sikh terrorists in India, Jews in Israel and groups within the United States. For example, abortion clinic bombers frequently quote scripture to legitimize their actions, and "several scripture-based messianic terrorist groups have emerged, the most prominent being "The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord" and "The Order."³⁰

Other examples of religious terrorist groups include "Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, the Palestinian Sunni Muslim organization Hamas, the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, the radical Jewish groups affiliated with the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, the Israeli extremists Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir, some American white-supremacist militias, and the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult in Japan."³¹

To gain a better understanding of Islam, it is important to note that there are two types of Islamicist movements, the Shia and Sunni. The Sunnis are unlike the Shias in that they are very hostile to the religious establishment. Al-Jihad is one such Islamic group of holy terrorists. Jihad means, "striving in the path of God." They refer to themselves as "The Islamic Group of Egypt."

There is a lot of information about this group due to its assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. The trial transcripts became available in Beirut and two scholars made a careful analysis of the Sunni Islamicist movement. Additionally, the group's leader Abd Al-Salam Faraj, who was later executed, wrote a pamphlet called "The Neglected Duty," which explained the group's constitution and gives valuable insight into Islamic radicalism.

"A glance at Muhammed's life and at the Qur'an, Faraj believes, establishes beyond doubt that striving is 'fighting, which means confrontation and blood': 'Slay the polytheists wherever ye find them, seize them, beset them, lie in ambush for them everywhere' (Qur'an 9:5); 'Fighting is prescribed for you' (Qur'an 2:216); 'Fight them and God will punish them at your hands, will humiliate them and aid you against them and bring healing to the breasts of people who are believers.'" (Qur'an 9:14, Jansen trans.)³²

Additionally, the "Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini found a justification for terrorism in the Koran, the holy book of Moslems."³³

The mention of these groups is not intended to create a bias in the reader but is simply mentioned to give a greater understanding of Islamic radicalism and its hatred and violence directed at the United States. As stated previously, it is important to note that religious terrorism is not confined to this religion, and in fact many believers in Islam do not feel justified in senseless violence just because of these quoted scriptures from the Koran. Additionally, most believers in Christianity would not feel the same justification from reading the many references related to violence in the Holy Bible.

All types of terrorism are dangerous and through a greater understanding of terrorism we can better understand the world in which we now live. A world that was changed by events from Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorism confronted us on our own land and changed the way we view our world.

Notes:

1. <http://www.terrorismanswers.com>
2. Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism: A Completely Revised and Expanded Study of National and International Political Violence, Based on the Author's Classic, TERRORISM* (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1987) 11.
3. <http://www.terrorismanswers.com>
4. Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism: A Completely Revised and Expanded Study of National and International Political Violence, Based on the Author's Classic, TERRORISM* (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1987) 72.
5. Thomas P. Raynor, *Terrorism (Past, Present, Future) Revised Edition* (USA: 1987) 128.
6. <http://www.terrorismanswers.com>
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Laqueur, "Age."
10. Laqueur, "Age" 106.
11. Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism (Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind)* (Washington, D.C., 1990). 26.
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21. Raynor, "Terrorism" 58.
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29. <http://www.terrorismanswers.com>
30. Reich, "Origins" 104.
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32. Reich, "Origins" 110.
33. Raynor, "Terrorism" 59.