

The State Department's 1996 Terrorism Report: Filling in the Gaps

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Brief Analysis

Last week, the Department of State released "Patterns of Global Terrorism 1996," its authoritative survey of trends and developments in international terrorism. While it remains an invaluable resource for policy makers and scholars, some of the report's analytical conclusions are deserving of intense scrutiny and debate. Most troubling in this regard is the report's strong implication that, with the exception of Iran, state-sponsored terrorism has been largely curtailed. In particular, the report ignores both important facts and circumstantial evidence which strongly indicates that the Palestinian Authority (PA), Syria and Iraq all remain actively involved in international terrorism.

Palestinian Authority At best, the report conveys only part of the PA's approach to terrorism last year, saying that the PA "continued its efforts" to "combat," "root out," and "rein in Palestinian violence aimed at undermining the peace process." It also notes that the PA had "prevented several planned terrorist attacks," arrested terrorist suspects and that "Chairman Arafat and other senior PA officials regularly condemned acts of terrorism." However, the report makes no mention of charges that the PA operates a 'revolving-door' prison from which many terrorist suspects are freed or allowed to escape rather than be forced to stand trial or be extradited. The Israeli Government says that the PA has refused to cooperate in the extradition of numerous suspected terrorists. Press reports indicate that there were at least three separate rounds of PA prison releases of Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists in April, September and November 1996. Some of these suspects have been reportedly recruited into the PA's security apparatus. The report also does not mention the PA's failure to arrest certain suspected terrorists, such as the leader of the military wing of Hamas, Mohammed Deif, and to confiscate or prevent the importation of illegal weapons into Palestinian-controlled areas, as required by Oslo II.

The report also does not refer to public statements made by Yasser Arafat and other PA officials that "armed struggle" remains an option. Not only does such rhetoric help legitimize terrorist groups like Hamas but it also probably has served to help incite specific acts of Palestinian violence. September's bloody tunnel rioting-when Arafat's own policemen participated in the shooting and, according to The Wall Street Journal, the Voice of Palestine radio station "ran constant broadcasts" urging mass riots-is just one example of the PA's inciting Palestinian violence against Israel last year. As one Palestinian told the Associated Press at the time, "The Palestinian Authority is giving us the green light ... to come back to the intifada." Seventy people were killed in those riots. The PA also authorized terrorist groups to stage inflammatory rallies inside Palestinian-controlled areas in 1996. At one such rally for thousands of Hamas supporters, posters were held up showing a bombed out Israeli bus atop the caption, "We worship God by killing Jews." The PA did not condemn any of the rallies' messages of incitement.

Syria The report states that there is "no evidence" of direct Syrian involvement in "planning or executing" terrorist activities since 1986 even while acknowledging that Syria "has not acted to stop anti-Israeli attacks" by terrorist groups acting from Lebanon, hosts the "headquarters" and "training camps" for several terrorist groups, and that Syria provides "safehaven and support" as well as allowing "the resupply of arms" to terrorist groups. This alleged

Syrian stand-down seemingly does not take into account Jordanian press reports in the fall that "firearms and military equipment" were being smuggled into Jordan from a neighboring "Arab state" which, for at least one of the attempts, was identified as Syria. It also ignores long-standing Turkish allegations of Syrian infiltrations into Turkey of members of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to commit terrorist activity. The report also does not include allegations that Syria may have had some knowledge or involvement in last year's al-Khobar bombing in Saudi Arabia and that a suspect wanted for questioning by the Saudis in relation to Khobar was mysteriously reported by Syria to have committed suicide while in Syrian custody.

The report also fails to acknowledge what Iran and Syria refer to as their "strategic relationship," even though the report documents a similar relationship between Sudan and Iran. The report should have noted that the weapons Syria allows to be supplied to terrorist groups in Lebanon come on flights directly from Iran into Syria. These weapons shipments were critical to the terrorist groups in Lebanon. Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Sheikh Fadlallah, himself said in December 1996: "Syrian President Hafez al-Assad assumed a firm and responsible stand on the side of the resistance; if it were not for [Assad's support], Israel's agents would have ... destroy[ed] the resistance." The report also does not include in the Syrian section, that Iran's Vice President Hassan Habibi held a meeting in Syria last year with the leaders of several terrorist organizations, including Hamas, PFLP, PFLP-GC, and Islamic Jihad, and praised their activities in the wake of last year's bombings in Israel that killed dozens of civilians.

In contrast to the terrorism reports of the last three years, this year the report omits any reference to terrorist groups claiming responsibility from Syria for their terrorist activities in Israel. The reason for this departure from previous reports is unclear, as there were continued claims of responsibility from Syria in 1996. For example, last July, Colonel Saeed Moussa's Fatah Uprising claimed responsibility through a radio broadcast from Syria for an attack in Jericho in which three Israelis were killed. Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdullah Shallah also continued to issue statements from Syria, including one in November when he warned Israel that it was "just a matter of time" until Islamic Jihad again attacked Israelis.

Iraq While the report concludes that Iraq's ability to carry out terrorism has been "curbed by UN sanctions," it also warns that Iraq is "slowly rebuilding its intelligence network." In 1996, the report states that Iraq reportedly murdered more than 100 Iraqis associated with the opposition Iraqi National Congress (INC), renewed its threats against foreign relief personnel, and continued to provide safehaven to several Palestinian terrorist groups. The report also notes that a Jordanian diplomatic courier travelling in Iraq was murdered and robbed of his diplomatic pouch containing 250 Jordanian passports which could be used by terrorists for travel under cover.

However, the report does not include repeated implicit threats by the Iraqi government-controlled press against Ambassador Rolf Ekeus, the head of the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM). Aside from its reference to the murdered Iraqis associated with the INC, the report does not touch on Iraq's terrorism aimed at its own citizens, such as the murder of several women and children from the al-Majid clan as a result of Hussein Kamel's defection and later return to Iraq last year. The report also neglects to cite the many visits of delegations of radical Palestinian groups to Iraq in 1996. For example, a few weeks before the PFLP killed an Israeli mother and her son last December, a PFLP delegation visited Baghdad and met with Iraqi officials. A Hamas delegation also visited Baghdad in December and was received by Iraqi Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan and other Iraqi officials. According to an Israeli report, Saddam Hussein also has set up a committee in Baghdad to explore ways of channelling weapons to the PA.

Implications for U.S. Policy Precisely because the State Department's annual terrorism report provides policymakers and scholars with the authoritative information they need to formulate counter-terrorism strategies, its conclusion that, with the exception of Iran, state-sponsored terrorism has been curbed and that the PA is actively combatting the threat of terrorism, is disconcerting. If state-sponsorship of terrorism has been curtailed and the PA is actively

combatting the threat of terrorism, what accounts for the trend toward more deadly attacks on mass civilian targets and the use of more powerful bombs that nearly doubled the number of terrorist casualties in the Middle East from 445 in 1995 to 837 in 1996? As a partial explanation, the report points to the increased potency of more amorphous terrorist groups acting on their own. However, the report's omission of important facts and circumstantial evidence relating to the continued involvement of the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Iraq in terrorist activity suggests the U.S. may be overly sanguine about the efficacy of current counter-terrorism policies.

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