

# Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003: Behind the Curve?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he State Department released the 2003 edition of Patterns of Global Terrorism last week in accordance with its congressional mandate to provide an accounting of international trends. With several spectacular terrorist attacks, the war in Iraq, and a series of counterterrorism victories, 2003 witnessed profound changes in the arena of international terrorism. Unfortunately, the structure and content of the latest Patterns are strikingly similar to those of years past, missing an important opportunity to help senior policymakers fight the war on terror by assessing important new trends.

## Iraq

Although terrorism in Iraq emerged as a key area of focus during 2003, the new Patterns does not include a thorough analysis of attacks against civilians and diplomats there. Indeed, the "Middle East Overview" portion of the report does not contain a section about terrorism in Iraq. A handful of particularly grisly Iraq attacks are mentioned briefly in the preface by Ambassador Cofer Black, coordinator for counterterrorism, while other relevant issues are mentioned only under the "State Sponsors of Terrorism" subhead. Thus, the report fails to provide perspective on key attacks, including the following: the March 2003 suicide bombing by Ansar al-Islam that killed an Australian journalist; the July 3 killing of a British journalist in Baghdad; the August bombing of the UN headquarters and Jordanian embassy in Iraq; the October explosion at the Baghdad International Committee for the Red Cross; and the November destruction of the Catholic Relief Services Headquarters in Nasariyah. Although Patterns reports that "coalition forces had detained more than 300 suspected fighters" in 2003, it does not discuss foreign militants, former Ba'ath fighters, or other related issues. The report pays only cursory attention to the activities of Ansar al-Islam and of militants loyal to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born terrorist now expanding his network in Iraq and around the world.

## State Sponsors

The report's list of state sponsors of terror appears to be behind the curve as well. For one thing, Iraq remains on the list. In May 2003, President George W. Bush suspended all sanctions against Iraq with respect to its designation as a state sponsor of terror. Nevertheless, the country still appears on the list of such sponsors because there is no sovereign Iraqi government to make the certifications necessary to be removed from it. Meanwhile, despite indicating that the dangers from some of the Middle Eastern countries long designated as state sponsors have

diminished over the past year, the State Department still discusses these countries alongside more troublesome state sponsors. For example, the report acknowledges that Libya "held to its practice . . . of curtailing support for international terrorism." It also lauds Tripoli for its compensation to the families of victims of past Libyan terrorist attacks as well for its December 19 announcement that it would begin dismantling its weapons of mass destruction programs. Similarly, the report praises Sudan because its "cooperation and information sharing has improved markedly, producing significant progress in combating terrorist activity." In light of such language, the unchanging list of state sponsors in Patterns lacks conviction. Although there are still areas of concern regarding both Libya and Sudan (as well as Cuba and North Korea), highlighting them as state sponsors obscures the real dangers posed by Syria and Iran, two countries that continue to sponsor terror at alarming levels.

Despite the fact that Damascus "has not been implicated directly in an act of terrorism since 1986," Syria serves as a "transshipment point for resupplying Hizbullah in Lebanon." Syria also ranked among the top state sponsors in 2003 for its close ties to Palestinian terrorist groups that, like Hizbullah, have offices in Syria and occupied Lebanon. For example, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command all maintain bases of operation in Syria. Interestingly, Patterns includes Syria's own standard line of defense for these facts -- namely, that any such offices or bases in Syria are limited to "political and informational activities." The report also notes that "Syria has made efforts to tighten its borders with Iraq to limit the movement of anti-Coalition foreign fighters into Iraq." Curiously, though, it fails to note that Syria openly allowed such fighters to stream across its borders during the Iraq war itself. The report even includes commendation for Syrian-U.S. cooperation despite the fact that Damascus took several dangerous steps in 2003.

According to Patterns, Iran "remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 2003." The report gives a frank accounting of Iran's backing of Hizbullah and Palestinian terrorist groups, asserting that Tehran "was involved in the planning of and support for terrorist acts and continued to exhort a variety of groups that use terrorism to pursue their goals." Yet, the report understates the "variety" of Iranian policies "which ran counter" to the interests of the coalition in Iraq. Iran provided shelter for al-Qaeda fugitives after both the war in Afghanistan and the Iraq war. Tehran then refused "to publicly identify senior members [of al-Qaeda on its soil] on the grounds of 'security'." Iran also sheltered members of Ansar al-Islam; the organization's fighters regularly cross over the porous Iran-Iraq border with the intention of killing Americans.

#### Al-Qaeda Affiliates

Patterns does little to illuminate the morphing of al-Qaeda through its affiliates and its clandestine cells -- the most significant development in international terrorism over the past year. As Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified on February 24, 2004, U.S. efforts against al-Qaeda "have transformed the organization into a loose collection of regional networks that operate more autonomously." He concluded that "the steady growth of [al-Qaeda] through the wider Sunni extremist movement and the broad dissemination of al-Qaeda's destructive expertise ensure that a serious threat will remain for the foreseeable future -- with or without al-Qaeda in the picture."

Yet, Patterns addresses the phenomenon of semiautonomous affiliate groups in the briefest, most cursory fashion. The fact that al-Qaeda serves as an "umbrella organization for a worldwide network" is not mentioned until late in the report, along with the key point that the network "has dispersed in small groups across South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and probably will attempt to carry out future attacks against U.S. interests." Although the report lists a great many of the emerging affiliates, it lists them as if they were wholly separate groups. This is an outmoded approach to dissecting and analyzing al-Qaeda. The events of 2003 illuminated the patterns of cooperation between affiliates, the relationship between various leaders and cells, and other dangerous links. Analysis of these patterns is essential to gaining a thorough understanding of the al-Qaeda phenomenon and its

evolution.

## Politics and Terror

One innovation in this year's Patterns was the inclusion of glowing praise for Saudi Arabia and its efforts to combat terrorism. The report notes that the Saudi regime "initiated an ideological campaign against Islamist terrorist organizations" and that Saudi leaders now "espouse a consistent message of moderation and tolerance." The same week Patterns was published, however, Crown Prince Abdullah stated "that Zionism is behind terrorist actions in the Kingdom. I can say that I am 95 percent sure of that." Such statements should prompt the writers of next year's report to reconsider their analysis.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the monograph [Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror. \(templateC04.php?CID=135\)](#)

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