

To Win the Terror War

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

The capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is great news for the War on Terror: The United States continues to take out al Qaeda's top leaders. But last month's federal indictment in Tampa, Fla., of eight members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is vital, too: It shows that the Bush administration has learned two key lessons of the War on Terror. Unfortunately, many of our allies, especially in Europe, have not.

The eight are charged with various conspiracy charges surrounding their membership in and association with, and activities on behalf of, Palestinian Islamic Jihad -- an illegal enterprise engaged in murder and other crimes. In essence, the Tampa case is an indictment of PIJ itself.

But here are the signs that the U.S. government has learned how to take the War on Terror seriously: 1) These operatives are not charged with detonating bombs, but simply with providing financial and logistical support to facilitate those bombings. 2) PIJ has no known links to al Qaeda.

Lesson No. 1: The War on Terror must target all terrorist groups, not just al Qaeda and its affiliates.

PIJ warrants scrutiny in its own right as a designated Foreign Terrorist Group responsible for murdering and injuring civilians.

Neither the victims' nationality nor the cause that "justified" their deaths should play any role in the decision to target a terrorist group. All terror is beyond the pale, and any cause that employs terror to achieve its goals -- however legitimate those goals may be -- delegitimizes itself. Case in point: Palestinian terror groups such as PIJ and Hamas.

Like different criminal gangs that use the same fence, international terrorist groups that cooperate in nothing else often still have strong logistical links. For example, al Qaeda and Hamas raise, launder and transfer funds via many of the same channels, including the al Taqwa Bank, the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and more.

Moreover, in February 2002, CIA Director George Tenet told Congress that if Palestinian groups "feel that U.S. actions are threatening their existence, they may begin targeting Americans directly, as Hezbollah's terrorist wing already does." Last month, he updated Congress on the threat: "The days when we made distinctions between terrorist groups are over."

Lesson No. 2: We must target those who fund and facilitate terrorism, not just those who carry out the attacks.

America began to learn this on 9/11: Those 19 men could never have succeeded without money and other aid, from travel documents to training, from a sophisticated and well-entrenched support network.

Such support networks are essential to large-scale operations. Individuals, groups and states that provide funds and other support for terrorist activity are no less guilty than whoever completes the attack by detonating the bomb, pulling the trigger or crashing the plane.

Both these lessons are critical to the success of the War on Terror -- and our European allies have learned neither. Unless an individual is either linked to al Qaeda or attempting to detonate a bomb, European authorities still hesitate to take action.

This was the case last spring, when German officials finally cracked down on the al-Tawhid terrorist group operating under the command of the now-infamous Abu Musab al Zarqawi, but only after discovering -- luckily in time -- that the group planned to conduct bombing attacks in Germany.

Until then, the group was allowed to run a sophisticated logistical and financial support network raising funds for Zarqawi's network and procuring false documents for al Qaeda and Taliban fugitives escaping Afghanistan. It remains unknown how many terrorists the al-Tawhid cell exfiltrated from Tora Bora to Europe and elsewhere until European authorities finally busted the cell.

Last October, a delegation of senior U.S. Treasury Department officials went to Europe to seek trans-Atlantic cooperation in freezing the accounts of 12 or so terror financiers. Headed by Undersecretary for Enforcement Jimmy Gurule, the delegation provided detailed information of the funding this "dirty dozen" provided to terrorist groups.

Such financiers openly fund Palestinian groups like Hamas, but are wary of publicizing their support for al Qaeda. So as not to jeopardize intelligence sources and methods, the U.S. request relied mainly on data on their Hamas ties. Not enough, says Europe: It demands evidence they fund "more than just" Palestinian terror groups. So the trans-Atlantic effort to freeze the funds of these terror financiers is on hold.

No effort to "drain the swamp" in which terrorists operate can succeed if nations around the world continue to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate terrorism, or if they decline to treat terrorism's financiers as the actual terrorists they are.

The Tampa indictments make clear that the United States will fight vigorously against those who resort to terrorism or assist it, no matter what the cause and no matter who the victim. Our allies across the pond would do well to learn the lesson: The success of the War on Terror depends on it. ❖

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