

Bush Administration Two-Faced on Terror

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Articles & Testimony

The year 2001 will forever be known as the year of the worst terrorist attack in the history of mankind, so far. The 2001 edition of Patterns of Global Terrorism, the U.S. government's preeminent annual accounting of international terrorism, understandably focuses on Sept. 11 and attacks by al-Qaida and its terrorist affiliates.

Until Sept. 11, fewer than 1,000 Americans were killed in terrorist attacks in the United States or abroad in more than 30 years. Until Sept. 11, no one terrorist operation killed more than 500 people at one time.

Sadly, despite the steady quantitative and qualitative increase in Palestinian terrorist activity throughout 2001, the report is disappointingly soft on Palestinian terrorism. Judging by its treatment of terrorism overall, as evidenced by the case of Palestinian terrorism, the report earns failing grades.

U.S. policy on Palestinian reform and re-energizing Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking is crippled by the administration's indecision over how to deal with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat following his documented role in anti-Israeli terrorism. A big part of the problem is the disconnect among such key decision-making players as the State Department, the Pentagon and the White House, which has paralyzed the administration's capacity to make policy.

The Bush administration apparently suffers from a similarly split personality regarding Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon. Never was an assertive national security adviser needed more than now.

The State Department report's "Chronology of Significant Terrorist Incidents" lists only nine of the 97 Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel in 2001. The only apparent common denominator among these, which run the gamut from a Tel Aviv suicide bombing to a drive-by West Bank shooting, is that non-Israeli foreign nationals were killed in eight of them.

The underlying suggestion -- that attacks killing Israeli civilians alone do not constitute terrorism -- is abhorrent.

The attacks not deemed "significant" include the Dec. 2 Hamas suicide bombing in Haifa (15 killed, 40 wounded), the Nov. 27 joint Fatah/Islamic Jihad shooting attack in Afula (three killed, 50 wounded), the July 16 Islamic Jihad suicide bombing in Binyamina (two killed, 11 wounded) and the May 18 Hamas suicide bombing in Netanya (five killed, 100 wounded).

The report lists the source of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades' external aid as "unknown" despite extensive documentary evidence, described by the State Department as authentic, proving Mr. Arafat personally authorized payment to the group for bullets and explosives. Al Aqsa was recently designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) but receives scant attention in the report.

Mr. Arafat's bankrolling of terrorists, and terrorism emanating from within the Palestinian Authority (PA), are not addressed.

Mr. Arafat, in fact, is praised for calling for a cease-fire on Dec. 16. His speech glorifying martyrdom two days later is ignored. The report even blames Israel in part for the PA's failure to combat terror, citing "Israel's destruction of the PA's security infrastructure" -- as if Israeli retaliatory attacks were the cause, not the result, of the PA's refusal to fulfill its commitments to combat terror.

The report glosses over terror attacks by Mr. Arafat's own Fatah groups such as the Tanzim, which it describes as "loosely organized cells of militants drawn from street-level membership in Fatah."

Actually, most members are PA police officers, and all funds came from the PA. The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), removed from the FTO list in 1999 but added to the Treasury Department's Specially Designated Terrorists (SDT) list for its recent attacks, is absent from the report. The report notes the assassination of an Israeli minister by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) but ignores the group's string of bombing attacks.

There is a glaring disconnect between the many presidential statements condemning terrorism, or those equating support for terrorism with terrorism itself, and the far more fainthearted approach taken by the State Department in this report.

It is imperative that the administration speak with one voice if it is going to make intelligent policy.

Unfortunately, the 2001 Patterns fails to echo the administration's previously firm statements on international terrorism. Instead, the report highlights the cacophony of discordant and competing voices emanating from different corners of Washington's decision-making elite and, ultimately, represents the State Department's perspective on terrorism - emphasizing the impact of terrorism on specific policy objectives - instead of a holistic U.S. position on international terrorism. ❖

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