

The State Department's Annual Terrorism Report: Politics As Usual

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May 1, 2001

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Brief Analysis

On April 30, the Department of State issued its comprehensive annual report *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, describing incidents and trends in international terrorism in the year 2000. This year's report covers the first three months of accelerated Palestinian-Israeli violence. It also marks the first time the Bush administration State Department has been compelled to publicly comment on the nature of Lebanese Hizballah attacks against Israel in the post-withdrawal era.

The Palestinian Authority *Patterns 2000* was the third State Department report dealing with the Palestinian Authority (PA) issued during the Bush administration, following the February 2001 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and the March 2001 "Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Commitments Compliance Act (PLOCCA) Report." A central part of the semi-annual PLOCCA Report—which documents PA and PLO compliance with its peace-process commitments—is an assessment of PA counterterrorism efforts. Notably, the PLOCCA Report did not assign the PLO, the PA, or any senior Palestinian official responsibility for any of the violence or terrorism that occurred during the first seventy-five days of the al-Aqsa Intifada.

Last year in *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999*, the State Department awarded the PA high marks for its counterterrorism efforts and ongoing security cooperation with Israel. Indeed, *Patterns 1999* praised the PA for "continu[ing] to act against Palestinian perpetrators of violence against Israel" and for signing the Sharm al-Shaykh Accord, which "affirmed a number of provisions regarding security cooperation." As with 1999, *Patterns 2000* commends the PA for its "efforts to uproot terrorist infrastructure" for the better part of the year. While State Department accolades for the PA cease with the start of "the crisis," the *Patterns 2000* report offers no U.S. rebuke of PA behavior.

Instead, *Patterns 2000* refers only to Israeli criticism of the PA. The report notes that Israeli officials: 1) "publicly expressed their dissatisfaction with PA counterterrorism efforts," 2) "accused PA security officials and Fatah members" of participating in attacks, and 3) "charged that the release of several prisoners . . . had facilitated terrorist planning" and that PA security officials had "not been responsive to their calls" to act against the violence. In opposition to these abovementioned Israeli allegations—the validity of which the State Department does not

comment on— Patterns cites only the Israeli concern of Iranian support to Palestinian rejectionists bent on disrupting the peace process as being "well-founded."

The reliance on statements of Israeli officials—to the exclusion of easily obtainable open-source materials and even previous State Department determinations—damages the credibility of the report. The obvious question is why does Patterns not cite Palestinian officials, respected Western sources, or even State Department officials to support the Israeli claims? On October 10, for example, Gaza preventative security chief Muhammed Dahlan pronounced security cooperation with Israel "buried" and acknowledged that "all Palestinian forces . . . including the [Islamist] opposition" were coordinating the violence.

Also problematic is the discussion of the PA's release from prison of Hamas terrorists. Patterns quotes only Israelis on this issue, despite the considerable information available from other sources. Palestinian officials have repeatedly confirmed that prisoners were released at various times. The report's insistence that leading Hamas bombmaker Mohammed Deif "escaped" from PA prison is similarly contradicted by PA spokesmen, such as Samir Rantissi, who have explained that he was released so he could not "be reached by the Israeli authorities." In many other cases around the world, the State Department cites information from U.S. government sources, but there is no hint in Patterns that U.S. diplomats—much less the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials who meet frequently with Israeli and PA security officials—had any useful information about terrorism in the PA areas or Israel. Perhaps most troubling, however, is that Patterns cites only Israeli sources to suggest that the PA had "been unresponsive" to their pleas to take decisive measures against the violence, particularly given that the PA was "unresponsive" to the cajoling of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on this same issue.

The report never addresses the issue of accountability for the three months of violence that transpired during the period covered by the report. At one point, Patterns makes the odd claim that "the breakdown [of negotiations and counterterrorism cooperation] sparked [the] cycle of violence." A more accurate characterization came from Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Ned Walker on March 29. When asked about PA minister of post and telecommunications Imad Faluji's boast that the violence was "planned since Chairman [Yasir] Arafat's return from Camp David" in July 2000, Walker commented, "I don't see why I should doubt the spokesman for the Palestinians." Rather, Patterns uses indirect language to suggest that Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks are understandable, saying that they occurred "against the backdrop of violent Palestinian–Israeli clashes."

On the Lebanese Front Also difficult to understand is Patterns 2000 coverage of Hizballah, one of those groups designated by the Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Hizballah is mentioned in several sections of the report, but the full scope of its activities is never fully defined, nor is the extent to which these activities are terrorism—an important issue, given that in previous years, the U.S. government has argued that some Hizballah armed actions were not terrorism. For example, in addition to generally constituting a "significant threat to U.S. interests globally," the only actions of Hizballah in 2000 cited in Patterns were the "Fall 2000 kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers from Sheba'a Farms," and the kidnapping of an Israeli "non-combatant" lured to Lebanon from Europe.

Remarkably, there is not a single mention of the May 24, 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in the entire report. In previous years, it appeared that the State Department accepted Hizballah attacks against Israeli troops in southern Lebanon and northern Israel as "legitimate resistance" and not "terrorism." The Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon—which was certified by the United Nations to be in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 425—should have changed the calculus. Based on the change in the status quo, Hizballah attacks against Israelis post-May 24 should be considered "terrorism." Yet it appears that State has not yet made this determination, for save the kidnappings, none of the Hizballah attacks—such as the interdicted Hizballah infiltration on October 21, or the November 26 explosion that killed one Israeli soldier and wounded two others—were even cited in the report.

What Qualifies As "Significant"? Over and above these described deficiencies in the State Department report, Appendix A of Patterns, "The Chronology of Significant Terrorist Incidents, 2000," is also problematic. While the chronology presented in this appendix describes events as diverse as church bombings in Tajikistan, bus bombings in India, and vandalism against a McDonald's restaurant in Cape Town, South Africa, the only two references to Israel are the attempted assassinations of an Israeli diplomat and the vice consul in Jordan. There is no mention in this section of Hamas bus bombings in Tel Aviv or the ongoing shooting from the Palestinian village of Beit Jala into the Israeli neighborhood of Gilo in Jerusalem. Nor did this section cite any Hizballah actions—even the kidnappings of Israeli "non-combatants"—as "significant."

Conclusion If there is a theme that connects the coverage of the PA and Hizballah in Patterns 2000, it is that the report does not reflect the new realities. Circumstances have changed radically from 1999 in both cases, with Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 and the PA's support for violence in the latter part of 2000. As such, the State Department reportage is license for a status quo in U.S. policy vis-à-vis Lebanon, Syria, and the PA. Despite the statement in Patterns 2000 that it is "increasingly important" that states should adopt a "'zero tolerance' for terrorist activity within their borders," the real message of this year's report is that at least for the time being, political—not counterterrorist—concerns hold the day.

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