

The State Department's 1999 Terrorism Report:

Issues to Watch

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Apr 26, 2000

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Brief Analysis

On April 29, the U.S. Department of State will issue Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999, its comprehensive annual survey describing events, trends, and developments in international terrorism during 1999. Because it is based on open source material already available to the informed public, the significance of the report lies more in how the information is presented than in the actual information it presents. The key, therefore, is to read between the lines of Patterns for nuances in the administration's policy approach toward terrorism and its central actors. What follows is a brief overview of issues to look for in this report.

Palestinian Authority. Patterns 1998 commended the Palestinian Authority (PA) for continuing to "act against perpetrators of anti-Israel violence." At the same time, however, the report asserted that "more PA effort" was required to "enhance security cooperation" with Israel. Patterns 1998 ended on an optimistic note, citing the October 1998 signing of the Wye River Memorandum as a potential key to increased security cooperation. Patterns 1999 will undoubtedly once again give the PA high marks for preempting attacks and for better trilateral security coordination with Israel and the Central Intelligence Agency; lately, both Israeli and Hamas officials have cited the efficacy of such Palestinian counter-terrorism efforts. Indeed, during a June 1999 interview, Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzouk described this coordination as a major impediment to Hamas military operations.

While recognizing this progress, it will also be important to see whether Patterns 1999 also exposes deficits in the PA's counter-terrorism program, perhaps the most significant of which relate to Hamas's financing and recruitment infrastructure. According to a 1999 assessment by Israeli Army Intelligence chief Amos Malka, one year after the Wye River Memorandum, the PA had still not yet taken the "strategic decision to uproot" the network. Although the PA arrests vast quantities of Oslo opponents and Islamic activists, terrorists still routinely escape from PA prisons or elude capture in PA territory. For example, since 1993, Muhammed Deif, expert bomb maker and acknowledged military leader of the Izzadin al Qassam wing of Hamas, has resided in the Gaza Strip. Deif's counterpart in the West Bank, Abu Hanud, also remains at large in the PA. Laxity toward some terrorist prisoners also persists, exemplified by an episode in October 1999 wherein three leaders of the Islamic Jihad "escaped" from Palestinian prison as a guard was escorting them to a university to enroll in classes.

Syria. According to Patterns 1998, Syria has not directly engaged in terrorism since 1986. Syria retains its classification as a "state sponsor of terrorism" because it provides safehaven and basing privileges to several terrorist organizations in both Damascus and Syrian-controlled territory in Lebanon, and because it allows Hizballah in Lebanon to receive military supplies via Syrian territory.

Syria did take a few positive steps in 1999, including one well-publicized meeting in July during which Syrian vice president Abdel Halim Khaddam met with Palestinian rejectionist groups based in Damascus and reportedly told them to "drop armed struggle." Aside from this one incident--which was subsequently denied by Hizballah (see Al-Hayat al-Jadida, July 21, 1999)--very little appears to have changed in 1999; operational support for Hizballah proceeded unabated. Damascus maintained its ongoing high-level contact with terrorist organizations and continued to serve as a refuge for anti-Israel terrorist organizations.

While Patterns 1999 will likely mention the ongoing issue of Syria's provision of safehaven for Palestinian terrorist organizations, it is less certain that Kurdish terrorism will be cited. In fact, in 1999, administration officials suggested that Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan's 1998 expulsion constituted the end of PKK presence in Syria. In September 1999, however, the Turkish General Staff stated that the presence of (Kurdish) terrorists in Syria "continues to pose a threat. . . as it posed in the past." Patterns 1999 should at least note that six months ago, Turkey complained of ongoing terrorism on its southern border.

Patterns 1999 is unlikely to address what could be a major terrorism issue in 2000: Syrian-supported attacks against Israel or Jewish targets following Israeli's planned withdrawal from southern Lebanon. After withdrawal, any pretensions of "national resistance to occupation" will cease, and continued attacks--by Islamists, Palestinians, or other groups--should fall solely within the rubric of terrorism. To this end, Patterns 2000 will have to fully address the ambiguous status of Lebanon: is it a "state sponsor" of terrorism or, as currently noted, simply a country that "lacks complete control" over its territory?

Reforming Rogues? Patterns 1998 contained a lengthy section on Iranian state sponsorship of terrorism that included, inter alia, several assassinations of regime critics; continued support for terrorist organizations including Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad; provision of safehaven to the PKK; and ongoing advocacy for the Salman Rushdie death sentence. Despite the election of President Muhammad Khatami in 1997, it appears that little has changed regarding Iranian terrorism since his ascendancy. Assassinations of regime opponents continued in 1999, as did support for various terrorist organizations including Hamas and Hizballah.

In addition to these ongoing terrorist ties, the State Department in October 1999 acknowledged for the first time that it had possession of "specific information" as to the "involvement of Iranian Government officials" in the 1996 Khobar, Saudi Arabia bombing that claimed the lives of nineteen American servicemen. At the same time, however, a statement released by the Department of Justice indicated that no conclusion had been reached regarding whether the attack was actually "directed by the Government of Iran." Even if Patterns 1999 echoes this nuanced distinction, it will be important to see whether it highlights Iran's continued provision of safehaven to the perpetrators of the bombing.

Like Iran, the coverage of Iraq in 1999 will likely differ little from last year's assessment. In its discussion of safehaven, however, Patterns 1999 should mention indicted World Trade Center bombing fugitive Abdul Rahman Yasin, who has resided in Iraq since 1993. Previous reports have neglected to do so.

Of the perennial members of the state sponsors of terrorism club, Libya was the only arguable success story in 1999. Patterns 1998 censured Libya primarily for its non-cooperation with the Pan Am 103 (Lockerbie) investigation, and for its continued support for Palestinian terrorist organizations. In 1999, Libya surrendered the two Lockerbie suspects for prosecution in the Netherlands and expelled the Abu Nidal Organization. These moves were welcomed

in Washington by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs Ronald Neumann, who in November 1999 said that "change can now be imagined" in U.S.-Libyan relations. Notwithstanding Neumann's statement, a key question remains unanswered: to what extent was Libyan Leader Muammar Qadhafi involved in Lockerbie? This issue may not be explored fully in the Netherlands trial, but it needs to be addressed by the U.S. intelligence community prior to any change in the designation of Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Conclusion. Although the alleged decline in state sponsorship of terror has been a recurrent theme in Patterns for several years, the practice remains pervasive in the Middle East. Osama bin Ladin's continued presence in Afghanistan, where he is provided sanctuary by the Taliban, is emblematic of this problem. Still, the temptation to encourage and reward some perceived positive changes in the region--such as the entrance of moderates into government in Iran or the participation of Syria and the Palestinian Authority in the peace process--will be difficult to resist. But the credibility of the administration's law enforcement approach to terrorism will depend on a consistent effort to bring to justice terrorists--especially those responsible for the deaths of Americans--residing in Syria, Iran, Libya, Afghanistan, the PA, and Iraq.

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