

The Battle against Terrorism:

Report from the Administration

Oct 25, 1999



Brief Analysis

On October 12, 1999, Ambassador Michael Sheehan, coordinator for counterterrorism at the Department of State, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following are excerpts from his prepared speech. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=35\)](#)

The Changing Character of Middle Eastern Terrorism

"The international terrorism by Middle Eastern groups that plagued us in the 1970s and early 1980s was different in several respects from what we are seeing today. That period was the heyday of high-profile attacks such as airline hijackings, kidnappings, hostage-takings, and indiscriminate shootings and bombing of civilians in public places such as the international airports in Rome and Athens. The motivations of the most active Middle Eastern terrorist groups of that period were primarily secular nationalist, often leftist, and almost always anti-Israeli.

"During the 1980s, a new and, in many ways, more virulent type of terrorism emerged in the Middle East: terrorism often justified by religious extremism. These 'religious' terrorist groups introduced us to a terrible new form of violence: the suicide operation. These terrorists have proven to be more fanatical, more determined, and in many ways more unpredictable than were the secular terrorist of the 1970s. . . .

"These terrorists operate on their own, without having to depend on a state sponsor for safe-haven or material support. They often possess their own financial resources and means of raising funds, often through narcotrafficking, private business, independent wealth, and local financial support. . . .

"Usama bin Laden and his al-Qa'ida organization represent perhaps the most alarming trend in terrorism emanating from the Middle East. Bin Laden has created a truly transnational terrorist enterprise, drawing on recruits from areas across Asia, Africa, and Europe, as well as the Middle East.

"During the 1970s and 1980s, the governments of Syria, Libya, and Iran played a prominent role in supporting and directing the activities of Middle Eastern terrorist groups, as well as carrying out terrorist attacks themselves using state security or intelligence personnel. . . .

"Today, following years of more coordinated, generally U.S.-led international pressure and sanctions, state sponsorship is on the decline. Governments realize that they can no longer blatantly support terrorist groups, plan terrorist attacks, and harbor criminals with impunity."

Cooperation with Middle Eastern Governments against Terrorism

"In the Middle East, we are developing more effective counter-terrorist cooperation with more countries than ever before. In addition to our close, longstanding relationship with Israel on counterterrorism, we are now working these issues on a regular basis with Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and a number of Gulf States. . . .

"It is vital that we help friendly governments acquire the skills necessary to combat terrorism. Part of our cooperative effort includes providing training through the State Department's antiterrorism assistance program."

Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)

"We keep a careful eye on the groups designated as FTOs and on the key state sponsors to determine--through a painstaking review process--if they are continuing their support for terrorism. Both the FTO list and the state sponsors list are meant to be "living" lists, which can change over time as the behavior of groups and governments changes. If a group or country ceases its terrorist activity, we will give serious consideration to removing it from the list. We want to give them an incentive to mend their ways. . . .

"We will not consider removing a group from the FTO list, or a government from the state-sponsors list, until we are convinced that all such activities have stopped. It is not just a matter of ordering or carrying out a direct terrorist attack. We are equally focused on the preparations for terrorist attacks, in which we include activities such as recruiting, training, equipping, planning, and providing safe-haven and support to terrorists.

"We have very strong evidence of the direct involvement of certain Middle Eastern groups in terrorist attacks over the past two years. These groups include Hamas, Hizballah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad [PIJ], the Egyptian Islamic Group, the PFLP-GC [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command], and the Algerian Armed Islamic Group [AIG]. These groups are a long way from being considered for removal from the FTO list. [In addition,] there are a number of Middle Eastern groups which have not carried out an overt terrorist act in recent years but continue to recruit, train, equip, and plan for terrorism. These groups include the Abu Nidal organization, the PFLP, the PLF [Palestine Liberation Front] (Abu Abbas faction), and the two Jewish extremist groups, Kach and Kahane Hai. Any of these groups could end all activities in preparation for possible terrorist acts and, if we are convinced that they have renounced terrorism, could eventually qualify for removal from the FTO list.

"The DFLP [Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine] was the one Middle Eastern group that we chose not to redesignate as a foreign terrorist organization this year. The reasons for this decision were not political, but straightforward and factual: We simply did not have evidence that the DFLP continued to be involved in terrorist activity."

States and Terrorism

Iran: "Iran remains a leading state sponsor of terrorism. . . .

"Iran continues to be involved in a range of terrorist activities. These include providing material support and safe-haven to some of the most lethal terrorist groups in the Middle East, notably Hizballah, Hamas, and the PIJ. Iranian assistance has taken the form of financing, equipping, offering training locations, and offering refuge from extradition. Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Intelligence Ministry also continue to target Iranian dissidents abroad. . . .

"We have made it clear to Iran that there cannot be a lifting of the sanctions we have imposed or an improvement in relations until Iran takes meaningful steps to end its support for terrorism and cooperate in the fight against terrorism."

Syria: "Although Syria has not been directly linked to a specific terrorist attack in years, it nonetheless continues to provide support and safe-haven to a number of key terrorist groups, many of which have offices in Damascus and training facilities on Syrian soil and in Syrian-controlled areas of the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. These groups include Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP-GC, and other Palestinian rejectionists. . . .

"Until Syria ceases to give safe-haven to these groups, it will remain on the state-sponsors list."

Afghanistan: [rapporteur's summary of additional comments] The terrorism problem that emanates out of Afghanistan directly boomerangs back to the Middle East. As terrorists have more and more difficulty finding safe-havens in the Middle East, they have migrated to Afghanistan. The threat that emanates from Afghanistan reaches

not only to the Middle East and the Caucasus, but around the world as demonstrated by the lethal attacks against U.S. embassies in east Africa in 1998.

This report was prepared by Rania Al-Shirawi.

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