

## **STATE-SPONSORED TERRORISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE 1980**

Jérôme Mellon  
8 November 2001

### Introduction

The objective of my today's presentation is to give a quick overview of state-sponsored terrorism in the Middle East since 1980. However, I will put more emphasis on two specific states, namely Lybia and Syria. I have chosen these two countries because even if both are known to use terrorism to promote their interests, they have reached different levels of efficiency in doing so. I will also say a few words about Iran and about the objectives of the actions of the PLO.

### About state-sponsored terrorism

Since 1977, the number of international terrorist incidents resulting in fatalities has increased each year. Terrorists seem less and less reluctant to inflict casualties. The most alarming trend in the 80s was the growing number of incidents of large-scale indiscriminate violence, as terrorists detonate car bombs on city streets and set off bombs in airports, train stations, restaurants, department stores, and discotheques - actions carried out without warning, calculated to kill in quantity.

Another disturbing trend was state sponsorship of terrorism. A number of governments were and are still using terrorist tactics themselves or employing terrorist groups as a mode of surrogate warfare. These governments see in terrorism a useful capability, a "weapon system," a cheap means of engaging in war against domestic foes or other nations. Terrorists offer a cheap, deniable alternative to open, interstate armed conflict. Some nations that are unable to mount a conventional military challenge see terrorism as an "equalizer". Growing state sponsorship of terrorism has serious consequences. It puts more resources in the hands of the terrorists: money, sophisticated munitions, intelligence, and technical expertise. It also reduces the constraints on terrorists, permitting them to contemplate large-scale operations without worrying about alienating perceived constituents or provoking public backlash, since they don't need to depend on the local population for support. Without the need to finance themselves through bank robberies or ransom kidnappings and without the need to carry out operations just to maintain group cohesion, state-sponsored terrorist groups operate less frequently than groups that receive little or no state support, but they are many times more lethal and have far greater operational reach.

### New development in Middle East terrorism

Since 1980, the most important new development in Middle East terrorism has been the adoption of terrorist methods by state authorities. Politically motivated violence against noncombatants has evolved from a tool used exclusively against the state into an instrument of the state.

Evidence of organized acts of political terrorism came in Iran sometime between the 1905 revolution and the advent of Reza Shah to power in 1925. Several political groups were formed in this period to eliminate politicians, newsmen, and even religious leaders accused of working for foreign powers, notably Great Britain and Tsarist Russia. With the advent of the 1979 Iranian

Revolution, however, government-sponsored terrorism acquired wider application and in some sense even a sort of legitimacy. The hostage crisis of 1979 introduced a new element in Iran's long history of political terrorism. Irrespective of the ultimate outcome of the crisis, there is little doubt that from the outset it was deeply entangled with internal political developments in the infant Islamic Republic. The government sponsorship of that blatant act of international terrorism simply made the Islamic Republic an international outlaw. It also contributed heavily to the utility, if not the legitimacy, of acts of terrorism by all groups, whether in opposition or in support of the government.

#### Iran: spreading Islam through terror

The Islamic Republic of Iran strives to export its eccentric and fundamentalist reading of Islam throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world. Seeking nothing else than a basic reorientation of public life along strictly Islamic lines, it has used all methods available to achieve this goal. But in September 1980 Iraq attacked Iran, and Iran's main goal for the next eight years was the defeat of Iraq. Strapped for money and manpower, the luxury of sponsoring conventional efforts to change foreign regimes lapsed. Instead, Tehran resorted on terrorism. This tool had the advantage of requiring little money and few operatives; at the same time, it made good use of what Iran had in abundance - devoted followers. Tehran also developed an institution that changed the face of state-sponsored terrorism, the suicide attack. One could say that Iranian leaders deployed the terror weapon with intelligence and strategic purpose. Consequently, Tehran achieved some of its policy goals through terror. In fact, terrorism defined as the illegitimate use of violence for political or religiously inspired objectives has deep roots in Iran's recent history.

#### Israel: the Palestine Liberation Organization

Although Palestine is not officially a state, I thought it would be appropriate to briefly address the question of the PLO. The Palestine Liberation Organization seeks to destroy the State of Israel and replace it with an independent Palestinian polity under its own control. Founded in 1964, the PLO began as a tool of the Egyptian government. With the support of Arab and communist governments, the organization was quickly transformed from a minor movement into one of the most prominent actors in Middle East politics. But it was militarily weak. So rather than tangle with the formidable Israeli Defence Forces, the Palestinians developed an alternative way to destroy Israel, based on terrorism. That instrument was cheaper for the Palestinians to develop and presented a relatively efficient way to fight back Israel forces struggling to repress the Palestinian movement. Inspired by the Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria, and to a lesser degree by the Viet Cong, the PLO hoped to make life so miserable for Israeli civilians that they would eventually give up and abandon the country. But herein lay a basic misconception, for unlike the French in Algeria, very few Israelis have another home to return to. Moreover, Jews live in Palestine not just for reasons of convenience and gain, as did the French in Algeria, but for powerful religious and nationalist motives. Based on this understanding, flawed as it was, the PLO's violence failed to have its intended effect.

#### Libya: freedom-fighters

Over the past 30 years, Libya has been foremost on the list of countries supporting terrorism. Upon seizing power in September 1969, Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi put the dissemination of his revolutionary ideology throughout the world at the top of Libya's national agenda. Qadhafi's goal from the time he came to power was to make himself the most powerful leader in the Middle

East. But three limitations frustrated his ambitions: the small and unskilled population of Libya, the difficulty of turning cash from oil sales into power, and widespread resistance to his views, especially outside Libya. Terrorism offered a way to solve these problems.

The Libyan authorities earmarked vast economic and military resources for the realization of their 'revolutionary goal'. Addressing the Organization of Non-Aligned States in September 1986, Qadhdhafi declared: 'I will do everything in my power to divide the world into imperialists and freedom-fighters.' In accordance with the ideology adopted by Libya following Qadhdhafi's rise to power, the country vigorously applied itself to aiding terrorist "freedom organizations" and dictatorships threatened by the democratic 'imperialist enemy.' In addition to its direct involvement in terrorist activities, the state of Libya established extensive ties with dozens of terrorist organizations around the world, providing these groups with varied assistance. Numerous terrorist attacks have been carried out on Libya's behalf or with its help in Europe, Asia, South Africa and South America.

Libya's embassies throughout the world serve the terrorist groups as arms supply centres with weapons transported to the embassies from Libya by diplomatic pouch. Libyan diplomats also supply terrorists with intelligence regarding possible targets, forged documents, and assistance in arranging safe-houses in the target countries.

Libyan involvement in terrorism includes attacks carried out by soldiers, security operatives or Libyan diplomats, usually against Libyan dissidents abroad. Further terrorist attacks initiated by Libya include those commissioned by key members of the Libyan political hierarchy or their surrogates in the security forces. They are carried out by various terrorist organizations in return for generous financial payment.

More recently, we have seen Libya putting efforts to mend its international image in the wake of its surrender in 1999 of two Libyans accused of the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. The court found one of them guilty of murder, concluding that he caused the death of the flight's 259 passengers and crew as well as 11 residents of Lockerbie, Scotland. The judges found that he acted 'in furtherance of the purposes of [...] Libyan Intelligence Services.'

Also, Libya still remains the primary suspect in several other past terrorist operations, including the Labelle discotheque bombing in Berlin in 1986 that killed two US servicemen and one Turkish civilian and wounded more than 200 persons. And although Libya expelled the Abu Nidal organization and distanced itself from the Palestinian rejectionists in 1999, it continued to have contact with groups that use violence to oppose the Middle East Peace Process, including the Palestine Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

But overall, Qadhdhafi proved himself better at creating mischief than achieving political goals. His agents killed people and gained attention, but they changed almost nothing.

#### Syria: judicial use of terrorism

Syria under the rule of Hazif al-Asad is a state which affords patronage to terrorism, supports terrorist organizations and uses terrorism as a tool with which to further its strategic objectives. Asad aims to control, or gain preponderant influence over, all the territories that make up the

region known as Greater Syria - Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, in addition to Syria proper. Asad began to deploy state-sponsored terror in a significant way a few years after coming to power in November 1970, and his judicious use of this instrument is key to his statecraft. His hallmark is the closely calculated, low-key, and far-sighted use of terror. The Asad regime has made systematic use of the "terror weapon" mainly as a solution for the wide gap between Syria's aspirations to regional hegemony and its desire to play a leading role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the objective limitations and weaknesses of Syria from a military, economic and demographic point of view.

Indirect sponsorship offers Asad several advantages. It allows him to call on a greater number of individuals and organizations; he can more plausibly deny culpability when agents are caught; and it permits him to play an intermediary role between the groups and foreign governments. He is also able to maintain decent relations with many other states - even those whose citizens suffer his predations. As of the case of Jordan, for example, it can be argued that the entire Syrian-Jordanian relationship is dominated by the threat of terrorism from Syria.

Although Syria doesn't seem to have been directly involved in international terrorism since the end of the 80s, it has since then provided sanctuary and support for independent terrorist groups, including the Kurdistan Workers Party, or the PKK. Several terrorist groups maintain training camps or headquarters in Syrian territory.

From the Syrian perspective, the intensive use of the "terror weapon" allows Syria to advance a range of its interests both domestically and internationally: it guarantees the stability and survival of the regime at home; it enables Syria to apply pressure to its enemies in the Arab world; it makes the "Syrian order" in Lebanon stronger; it punishes Western countries and achieves political gains from them; and, above all else, it furthers Syria's strategic interests in the conflict with Israel.

The manner in which the "terror weapon" is used by the Syrian regime, as well as its targets, changes from time to time in accordance with political developments and changing pressures on Syria. In the past decade, one can perceive changes with regard to the manner in which the "terror weapon" was used when compared with the 70s and 80s. The factors underlying these changes were: the elimination of domestic opposition, the downfall of the Soviet Union, Syria's isolation in the Arab arena, Syria's participation in the peace process and its growing need for the United States. All of these factors led the Syrian regime to try and alter its image as a state sponsor of terrorism via tactical changes in the use of the "terror weapon", but without making any strategic concessions concerning its use of terrorism as a weapon for advancing Syrian interests.

In the framework of these changes, it is possible to identify three significant differences between Syria's use of the "terror weapon" in the 90s in comparison with the past: first, the Syrians are careful to use "terrorist subcontractors" and refrain from direct involvement in terrorism as a result of lessons learned in the 80s. Second, the order of priorities of the targets of terror have changed: Israel has become a preferred target whereas Turkey, the Palestinian Authority and pro-Western Arab countries have become secondary targets. Western countries have ceased to be direct targets of terrorism initiated by the Syrians. Third, the Syrians reduced their use of the left-wing Palestinian organizations whose terrorist activities abroad were revealed. They were replaced by a combination of other terror organizations activated by Syria and a joint Syrian-Iranian co-production involving the use of Islamic terror organizations in the framework of the strategic cooperation between the two sides.

Hezbollah and other Palestinian terrorist groups' policy of carrying out terrorist attacks is part of Syrian strategy and is influenced by it. However, Syria does not have sole and absolute control over these terrorist groups. Contrary to the 70s and 80s, Syria cooperates with its strategic ally Iran, and the terror attacks carried out by Palestinian Islamic organizations serve the joint and shared interests of the two countries. Thus, the Syrians make use of the Islamic organizations which receive ideological guidance, political and operational instructions as well as military and financial support from Iran.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, by comparing the use of terrorism by Libya and Syria, we can see that the efficiency of state-sponsored terrorism vary depending on the objectives of the state and the means it employed. In that sense, we can argue that Asad knew what he wanted and deployed violence with skill. He became a major force in regional affairs - acting and forcing others to react - in large part due to the intelligent use of terror. The critical factor here concerns the ability to connect means and ends. The failed leader engage in murder for its own sake; the successful ones make terrorism part of a larger strategy. It is in this sense that Asad is the most competent, Qadhdhafi the least.

# STATE-SPONSORED TERRORISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST SINCE 1980

Jérôme Mellon  
8 November 2001

## Structure of the presentation

### Introduction

1. About state-sponsored terrorism
2. New development in Middle East terrorism
3. Iran: spreading Islam through terror
4. Israel: the Palestine Liberation Organization
5. Lybia: freedom-fighters
6. Syria: judicial use of terrorism

### Conclusion

## Bibliography

D. Pipes: “Why Asad’s Terror Works and Qadhdhafi’s Does Not”, in Yonah Alexander (ed.), *Middle East Terrorism: Current Threats and Future Prospects* (Aldershot, 1994) (article originally dated Fall 1989)

B. M. Jenkins: “Defense Against Terrorism”, *Political Science Quarterly* (vol. 101, no. 5, 1986)

S. Zabih: “Aspects of Terrorism in Iran”, in Y. Alexander (ed.), *Middle East Terrorism: Current Threats and Future Prospects* (Aldershot, 1994) (article originally dated September 1982)

## Map of the Middle East

