



# Research Study

## *International and Transnational Terrorism: Diagnosis and Prognosis*

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## FOREWORD

The primary goals of this study are to cast the problem of internationalized terror into clear perspective and to provide the reader with a framework for a more systematic grasp of the subject. Terrorism is, however, a particularly controversial and complex phenomenon. Hence, it must be emphasized that the approach adopted and the judgments advanced are those of the author, David L. Milbank. So, too, are the basic definitions. And although it is analytically useful for the purposes of this paper, the distinction made between international and transnational terrorism is bound to draw some critical comment—if only because the former term has acquired so broad a currency in academic and journalistic literature.

The statistics presented also break new ground. This is because the author was able to draw on a comprehensive new data bank called ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events) that was developed for the Office of Political Research by Edward F. Mickolus during the summer of 1975 as a related but separate project.

Despite this advantage, however, several words of caution about the figures and statistical inferences that are set forth in this study are in order. In the first place, there are many significant gaps in our knowledge about specific incidents and groups—and even those terrorist organizations and actions on which there is considerable reliable information do not always fit neatly into the typologies that have been created for them. Moreover, the universe of incidents under review is small enough that unintended omissions (of which there are undoubtedly many) or erroneous classification of borderline events could have a statistically significant impact.

Comments or questions concerning this study (which does not represent a CIA position) will be welcomed. They should be addressed to the Director, Political Research.

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## SUMMARY AND KEY JUDGMENTS

### I. DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this study, international and transnational terrorism are defined as follows:

*Common Characteristics:* The threat or use of violence for political purposes when (1) such action is intended to influence the attitudes and behavior of a target group wider than its immediate victims, and (2) its ramifications transcend national boundaries (as a result, for example, of the nationality or foreign ties of its perpetrators, its locale, the identity of its institutional or human victims, its declared objectives, or the mechanics of its resolution).

*International Terrorism:* Such action when carried out by individuals or groups controlled by a sovereign state.

*Transnational Terrorism:* Such action when carried out by basically autonomous non-state actors, whether or not they enjoy some degree of support from sympathetic states.

### II. THE PHENOMENA IN RETROSPECT

There has been a marked and enduring upsurge in *transnational terrorism* since 1967 that has been characterized by:

- A substantial increase in the number of terrorist groups involved as well as in the number of countries in which they are operating;
- A trend toward greater international contact and cooperation among terrorist groups;
- A trend toward bolder and more dramatic actions;
- The general popularity of American targets; and
- A number of significant regional differences in the intensity and nature of such violence.

This upsurge is attributable in part to the dynamics of the Middle East conflict, an imbroglio which affects the interests of a large number of nations and is attended by particularly deep-seated feelings of bitterness and frustration. But the problem of transnational terrorism

would not have mushroomed to its present dimensions were it not for the concurrent convergence and acceleration of a number of changes in the global environment that had begun to take shape much earlier, e.g.:

- The technological advances that have provided terrorists with new mobility, new weaponry, and (through the introduction of TV-capable satellite communications) the near certain prospect that their more dramatic actions will receive prompt and world-wide publicity;
- The growth, fed by modernizing change, of global and regional ties, dependencies and obligations that have both provided terrorists with a host of new and potentially highly disruptive targets for attack (e.g., power grids and jumbo aircraft) and fostered a reactive upsurge in nationalism and ethnicity;
- An increasingly permissive political environment born of the challenge raised to the postwar order by the developing nations of the Third World, the “maverick” Communist regimes, various dissatisfied second rank powers, and a broad array of social forces fired, with differing degrees of responsibility, by a new sense of “social conscience”;
- The persistent if uneven behavior of those states, less than a score in number, that have furnished practicing or potential terrorists with funds, arms, training, documentation, and other operational support; and
- Changes in the overall economic environment that have fanned local dissidence and fed the communities of emigre workers that can provide terrorists with cover, recruits, and various forms of operational support.

There has not, however, been a parallel upsurge in *international terrorism*. Although there has been a good deal of such activity associated with the Middle East conflict over the past decade, the dimensions of the problem are essentially no greater today than they were in 1968.

Another significant difference stems from the fact that resort to *international terrorism* is just as likely to result from calculations concerning the relative efficacy of alternative methods of bringing national power to bear in a given situation as from an outright dearth of national resources. Hence, such behavior has not been the special province of any particular category of state. In contrast, as an option more congenial to urban than to rural groups, *transnational terrorism* has been characteristically spawned by societies at a mid to advanced stage of socio-economic development.

For its practitioners, terrorism's principal drawback is that its consequences are to a considerable degree unpredictable. As demonstrated in Jordan in 1970 and in Uruguay between 1970 and 1972, even what seem to be dramatic tactical successes can lead to strategic reverses of major proportions. All told, however, the record to date shows that the personal risks that have been incurred by international and transnational terrorists have been relatively low, and that their chances of achieving at least some of their near-term objectives have been strong. Moreover, because the impact of their activity has been magnified by the publicity it has received and by its interaction with other destabilizing trends and forces, its disruptive effects have been grossly disproportionate to the resources employed by the terrorists as well as to the actual damage done in terms of the cost to life and property.

With the exception of a number of bilateral agreements of proven utility (most notably the US-Cuban accord of 1973), the international response to terrorism has been relatively weak and ineffective. The principal obstacles to greater progress in this field have been the controversy over *justifiable* versus *illegal* political violence, a broad resistance to such further infringement of national sovereignty as would be implied in any inflexible curtailment of the right to grant political asylum, and a natural reluctance on the part of many states to commit themselves to any course of action that might invite retribution—either by terrorist groups or by states sympathetic to the terrorists' cause.

### III. THE OUTLOOK

*International terrorism* seems unlikely to pose much more of a threat to world order or US interests in the decade ahead than it does today.

- Even in its currently rather fluid condition, the international system subjects states to a host of legal obligations and practical constraints that they can ignore only at considerable risk.
- The potential implications of the various state-sponsored terrorist incidents that have been associated with the Middle East conflict notwithstanding, it seems likely that the employment of terrorist groups in a surrogate warfare role will continue to be more the exception than the rule for some time to come.

Despite the potentially salutary impact of some recent or likely developments (including the tougher stance toward terrorists that has been adopted by a number of states and the probability that technical innovations in the security field will make terrorism a more risky affair), the outlook for *transnational terrorism* is considerably less

encouraging. Specifically, the following factors and trends hold promise of aggravating the problem:

- The combined effects of technological advance, modernizing social and economic change, and growing interdependence will probably generate further increases in (1) divisive ethnicity and nationalism, (2) urban unrest, (3) terrorist capabilities, and (4) societal vulnerabilities.
- The widespread erosion of established institutions of authority—manifested in multiple challenges to the postwar international order and the increasing difficulties of governance encountered at the national level—that has both invited and facilitated terrorist activity in recent years seems likely to persist throughout much of the decade ahead.
- Since the net thrust of the forces at work within the international community promises to remain more centrifugal than centripetal, it seems unlikely that efforts to combat terrorism through binding world-wide conventions will prove to be much more effective than in the past.
- The likelihood that (1) national liberation and leftist revolutionary formations will continue to receive both moral and material support from a wide variety of transnational and international organizations and (2) transnational contact and cooperation among terrorist groups will gain further momentum holds forth the ominous prospect of the emergence of a complex support base for transnational terrorist activity that is largely independent of—and quite resistant to control by—the state-centered international system.
- Under such circumstances, any governmental assistance rendered to terrorist groups could have an even more deleterious impact than in the past, for it would risk simply increasing the recipients' potential for autonomous action.
- The problems of (1) extensive and sometime sympathetic publicity for terrorist acts and (2) the diffusion of terrorist-adaptable technological know-how are likely to persist in most parts of the world and thus to reinforce the risks associated with the wholesale deployment of sophisticated (and in many cases, man-portable) weaponry and the race to sell nuclear technology and modern armaments to developing countries.

The prospect of nuclear-armed terrorists can, in fact, no longer be dismissed. But because of the major problems that would be involved in the acquisition, storage, transport, and employment of a nuclear device, a more likely scenario—at least in the short term—would be a terrorist

seizure of a nuclear weapons storage facility or a nuclear power plant to exploit the publicity and the bargaining power inherent in the attendant threat of radiological pollution.

A more pressing threat, however, would seem to lie in the field of chemical, biological, and radiological agents of mass destruction. Not only are many of these agents relatively easy to acquire, but (because small—sometimes minute—quantities are usually all that are needed for potentially devastating effect) they also tend to be easy to conceal, easy to transport, and easy to introduce into the target area.

All told, transnational terrorism promises to pose a continuing and potentially gravely unsettling problem for the world community until such time—possibly years hence—that the international system gels into new and generally accepted contours. Although the frequency and intensity of violence in some current trouble spots will probably decline, it seems likely that:

- The overall number of terrorist groups engaged in transnational terrorist activity will, at best, remain at about the present level;
- The number of countries in which these groups are operating will increase;
- Because of their symbolic value, their availability, and the embarrassment they can create, the popularity of American targets will remain high;
- The world will witness steadily greater and more widespread sophistication in terrorist targetting, execution, and weaponry; and
- Although most terrorist groups will probably continue to be deterred by both moral considerations and calculations of the risks involved, the danger that a fanatic few might resort to weapons of mass destruction will increase accordingly.

#### **IV. IMPLICATIONS**

The phenomenon of widespread internationalized terror is not only likely to persist for at least the next several years, but also to evolve in ways that could pose a more substantial threat to US interests—and, under certain circumstances, to world order—than in the recent past.

- Whether or not weapons of mass destruction are actually brought into play, the odds are that the impact of transnational terror will be more sharply felt in the US in the years just ahead—primarily as the result of periodic increases in attacks on American targets abroad, but possibly through more frequent terrorist demands on the US Government and



occasional operations on US soil by foreign-based groups as well.

- Even if the problem of internationalized terror is not brought closer to home in the ways suggested above, it promises to impinge more directly on US interests and options with respect to a broad range of critical issue areas, including both East-West and North-South relations, the politically and economically sensitive questions of arms sales and the transfer of advanced technology, and the resolution of problems associated with the dependence of Western industrialized countries on foreign energy sources.

The importance of factors that are likely to affect the objective capabilities and options of terrorist groups in the years ahead is obvious. But in the final analysis, it is man's subjective perception of "reality" that serves as the primary determinant of his political behavior. Hence, those variables (e.g., cultural heritage, credo, and changes in the overall political environment) that can shape or alter the prisms through which the terrorists concerned view the world around them will bear equal attention.

Indeed, although the dimensions of the threat posed by internationalized terror should not be overdrawn, the factors bearing on this phenomenon and its potential ramifications are so numerous and cut across so many jurisdictional and disciplinary lines that the development of more effective national and international countermeasures is likely to be a particularly demanding task. Sadly, there are no sure guidelines for endowing any given government's approach to the problem of terrorism with the qualities required to meet this challenge. But while any number of alternative courses of action could prove equally effective, it bears emphasis that together with *timely intelligence* and *sound multi-disciplinary analytical support, flexibility* and *extensive coordination* (both intra- and inter-state) would seem to be critical to devising and implementing a counter-terrorist strategy that is both internally consistent and minimally disruptive to national values and foreign policy objectives in terms of "hidden" social, political, and economic costs.

Omitted here is material unrelated to Terrorism policy.

## **V. IMPLICATIONS**

Two basic messages emerge from the foregoing discussion. The first is that the phenomenon of widespread internationalized terror is not only likely to persist for at least the next several years, but also to evolve in ways that could pose a more substantial threat to US interests—and, under certain circumstances, to world order—than in the recent

past.\* The second is that the factors bearing on this phenomenon and its political ramifications are so numerous and cut across so many jurisdictional and disciplinary lines that the development of more effective national and international countermeasures is likely to be a particularly demanding task.

Whether or not weapons of mass destruction are actually brought into play, the odds are that the impact of transnational and international terror will be more sharply felt in the US in the years just ahead. There is, for example, good reason to believe that at least a few foreign terrorist groups are planning to step up their attacks on American targets abroad in the near future. Moreover, the influx of foreign travellers and dignitaries expected in connection with such major US-sponsored events as the current Bicentennial celebrations and the 1980 Winter Olympics will inescapably afford a host of opportunities for dramatic terrorist action. Hence, despite the likelihood that the practical considerations that have so far generally deterred foreign-based terrorist groups from extending their areas of operation to US shores will retain their present force, there is a good chance that a few will succumb to the temptation to do so.\*\* Finally, no matter how tough and well-publicized a "no concessions" policy the US Government maintains, it seems likely that Washington will be targeted by terrorist demands somewhat more frequently in the future—partly to probe more fully the limits of US resolve, partly for sheer publicity or other psychological effect, and partly to foster intergovernmental or domestic tensions.

More importantly, perhaps, even if the problem of internationalized terror is not brought "closer to home" in the ways suggested above, it promises to impinge more directly on US interests and options

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\*Despite the frequency with which terrorists have attacked American citizens and property overseas, the US has been lucky in many ways. For example, foreign terrorist groups have for the most part eschewed staging operations on American soil—and those transnational terrorist incidents that have been authored here by domestic groups have generally been relatively minor affairs. Furthermore, the US Government has, as previously indicated, rarely been the target of terrorist demands. Hence, except for extensive (and readily accepted) airport security measures, the quality of American life and democratic freedoms has been little affected. And Washington has so far been spared the agony of having the lives of key political leaders or large numbers of innocents, be they Americans or foreigners, hang on its decisions.

\*\*While it bears note, the parallel danger that commonly perceived opportunities for action in connection with such events could result in growing contact and cooperation between US-based and foreign terrorist groups falls outside the purview of this study.

with respect to a broad range of critical issue areas. For example, it is likely to:

- Figure as even more of an irritant in both East-West and North-South relations;
- Sharpen the dilemmas inherent in the politically and economically sensitive questions of arms sales and the transfer of advanced technology;
- Provide potential new grounds for strains in Washington's relations with its principal friends and allies;
- Reinforce some of the obstacles which currently impede efforts to find a mutually-acceptable way to cope with the dependence of Western industrialized countries on foreign energy sources; and
- Impose burdensome new demands on limited human and material resources.

Although, as emphasized in earlier discussion, the dimensions of the threat posed by international and transnational terror should not be overdrawn, the picture outlined above is sobering. Among other things, it suggests that the machinery and guidelines that the US and its allies have so far developed for dealing with the problem bear careful review.

There is no magic formula for endowing any given government's approach to the problem of terrorism with the direction, breadth, and coherence required to marshal the remarkably disparate talents and resources that are needed and to weave its response into the overall fabric of its domestic and foreign concerns. Indeed, any number of alternative courses of action could prove equally effective. Nevertheless, it bears emphasis that together with *timely intelligence* and *sound multi-disciplinary analytical support*, *flexibility* and *extensive coordination* (both inter- and intra-state) would seem to be critical to devising and implementing a counterterrorist strategy that is both internally consistent and minimally disruptive to national values and foreign policy objectives in terms of "hidden" social, economic, and political costs.

Obviously, such a strategy cannot be framed in isolation. Among other things, its architects would need ready access to top policymakers in both the foreign and domestic fields as well as to the advice of a broad range of government and non-government experts or interested parties. Moreover, the necessity to maintain some freedom of maneuver (born of the fact that every new terrorist incident is likely to have its unique aspects) is a particularly delicate

problem—and one that can easily contribute to unnecessary misunderstandings. Hence, routine pre-crisis coordination of terrorism-related policies and

contingency plans with all the key domestic and foreign actors whose interests and options they could affect becomes all the more important.