The Root Causes of
Terrorism in the Middle East

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Sources of Middle East terrorism. How and why did some groups decide to become terrorists in the Middle East?

Introduction

Along with heat, rampant corruption, and camels, terrorism is another characteristic that is popularly attributed to the Middle East. Indeed, this perception appears to be valid, as in the five-year period of 1998 to 2003 alone, the region saw 208 international terrorist attacks, resulting in the deaths of over 3,560 people (State Dept., 2004). The State Department designates the region as having 25 major active terrorist organizations (State Dept., 2009). Many of these organizations, such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah, are known for carrying out many of the region’s ‘high profile’ terrorist attacks. However, there are many lesser-known organizations, including Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, Kurdistan Worker’s Party, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who are capable-and culpable-of carrying out attacks of the same level of severity as their better-known counterparts. The fact that these organizations use violence to achieve their goals is the commonality between them. However, each of these organizations’ motivations for turning to violence is exceedingly diverse. While these driving forces are also complex, many of these organizations’ goals and motivations can be grouped into one of three types: nationalist, ideologically-based, or a hybrid of the two. This paper will provide an analysis of these three major motivations behind terrorist organizations, and will provide examples of several major groups to illustrate this analysis.

Different ‘Types’ of Terrorist Organizations

A common flippant misconception about terrorism in the Middle East is that it solely derives out of some ideologically-based hatred for all that the Western world stands for. While
ideology does play a big part in what drives certain organizations to commit acts of terror, it’s not often based out of a hatred for ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, or mom’s apple pie. Instead, ideologically-based terrorist organizations commonly seek to connect a particular group under some type of unifying banner. To use the case of Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda, two ideologically-based terrorist organizations, this unifying banner is Islamism (Chaliand and Blin, 350), or the belief that Islam should not only be the basis of a religious system, but a political one as well (Shanzer, 97).

For nationalist terrorist organizations, their actions are principally rooted out of a desire for some type of national home for a particular group; whether it is ethnic, religious, or otherwise. Two significant nationalist terrorist groups seen in the region have been the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and (the now defunct) Irgun. These two organizations provide an invaluable example of two diametrically opposed nationalist organizations, as each of their goals is to establish a nation for their own people on the same plot of land; the PLO seeks a Palestinian homeland, and Irgun sought a Jewish homeland prior to the establishment of the state of Israel.

The majority of terrorist organizations found in the region are neither ideological nor nationalist, but rather a hybrid of the two. Some examples of hybrid terrorist groups include the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), Hamas, Armed Islamic Group of Algeria, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Each of these organizations uses a particular ideology to provide a basis and a structure for the goal of the creation of their own state. There are a number of hybrid terrorist organizations that can be profiled, but the ideologies that we will see here range from religious nationalism to socialism, and the nations reach from Kurdistan to Palestine.

By looking at terrorist groups through one of these three lenses, we can see that in each of these groups, there are a number of shared characteristics that have come to shape their
motivations in turning to violent means to accomplish their goals. Despite these shared characteristics, each organization’s development is unique; something that can only be seen through an analysis of a sample of terrorist organizations.

**Type A: Nationalist Terrorist Organizations**

**The Palestine Liberation Organization**

The Palestine Liberation Organization was formed in 1964 as a merger between various Palestinian paramilitary and political organizations (FAS, 1998). This union served to gather the various individual efforts of each of these organizations, and to focus them all into the goal of the formation of a single, unified, Palestinian state (FAS, 1998). While Palestinians had used violence against the area’s Jewish inhabitants since as early as the 1920’s, its rise as a systematic political tool didn’t come about until the formation of the PLO, which allowed terrorist attacks to be better planned and organized (Rubin and Rubin, 176). The PLO’s willingness to use violence is outlined in Article 9 of their charter, which states: “Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine. Thus it is the overall strategy, not merely a tactical phase…” While the PLO never carried out violent actions in its own name, some terrorist attacks which can be attributed to them include the infamous 1972 Munich massacre, which led to the death of 17 people, as well as the 1970 Avivim School Bus Massacre, which led to the death 12 people (O’Balance, 40). Instead of using its own name, the PLO carried out acts of violence through the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), or other subsidiary terrorist organizations such as Black September. There are a number of reasons as to why the PLO chose terrorism over other political means. One of these rationales is that the continuation of an armed struggle against Israel goes hand in hand with the unification of all Palestinians. This reasoning is outlined in Article 10 of the PLO charter, which states that:
“[Armed struggle] also requires the achieving of unity for the national
struggle among the different groupings of the Palestinian people,
and between the Palestinian people and the Arab masses, so as to secure
the continuation of the revolution, its escalation, and victory”

Another reason behind the PLO’s decision to use terrorism against Israel’s civilian population rather than waging organized warfare was that this method of violence never had a chance of being successful. After an attempted guerilla war against Israel had failed in 1948, and after conventional Arab armies had failed to overthrow Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973, the chairman of the PLO Yasser Arafat instead chose to wage war on Israeli society in order to generate publicity for the PLO’s cause (Rubin and Rubin, 177). Lastly, Arafat preferred the use of terrorism against Western targets within Israel, because he believed that doing so would lead to many Western states withdrawing support for Israel, while also becoming eager to appease the PLO (Rubin and Rubin, 177).

Characterizing the PLO as a terrorist organization became more problematic in later years. This began in 1974 when it was granted observer status at the United Nations, and continued onto the Madrid Conference of 1991, when the United States dropped its characterization of the PLO as a terrorist organization. Today, the PLO is recognized as the sole representative of the Palestinian people by most countries, including Israel. While it may be difficult to characterize the PLO as a terrorist group now, as they are no longer engaged in terrorist activities, the use and promotion of such activities litters their history. The PLO then can be considered a nationalist terrorist organization (or at least a nationalist organization with a history of terrorism). There is no ideology that serves as the driving motivation behind its
actions; instead its only goal is to consolidate itself as the sole representative of the Palestinian people while seeking the creation of a unified Palestinian state.

**Type B: Ideologically-based Terrorist Organizations**

**Al-Qaeda**

Al-Qaeda is one of the largest global terrorist organizations, with an estimated membership in the thousands, and a presence stretching from its support base in the Middle East, all the way to Western countries. Osama Bin Laden formed the organization in August of 1988, with the intention of moving beyond the anti-Soviet struggle in Afghanistan, and to overthrow what he viewed as corrupt and heretical Muslim states, and replace them with the rule of Sharia law (Rubin and Rubin, 253). Since then, Al-Qaeda’s goals have evolved into seeking the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate (Rubin and Rubin, 253). Much as pan-Arabism sought the establishment of a unified Arab state, Al-Qaeda’s vision of a new caliphate seeks the establishment of a unified Islamic state, where the rule of law is determined by Sharia, or Muslim canonical law based on the teachings of the Quran.

Al Qaeda’s use of violence stems primarily from their interpretation of *jihad*, or the duty of Muslims to struggle for God, including through military engagement (Wright, 54). To this end, Al-Qaeda sees the use of terrorism as a form of this military engagement. Additionally, another major goal of Al-Qaeda is to rid Muslim Lands of Western influence. Through the use of violence, Al-Qaeda believes that any and all of these influences will become intimidated if they are targeted, and leave the region (Richardson, 67). Some of their most notorious terrorist actions include the 9/11 attacks, the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000, and bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi in 1998. Although it is seeking a nation in a sense, Al-Qaeda cannot be classified as
nationalist, as there is no real ‘nation’ for Al-Qaeda to be held accountable to. Instead, because Al-Qaeda legitimizes its use of terrorism through its interpretation of the Quran, it is indeed an ideologically-based terrorist organization.

**Type C: Hybrid**

**PKK**

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) was initially established as a Marxist-Leninst student organization in 1974, under the name Kongra-Gel (FAS, 2004). Its formation came about as a backlash to Turkey’s rapid economic development from the 1950s to 1960s, which led to the marginalization of Turkey’s working and minority population, including the Kurds in the Southeastern region of the country (Kutschera, 1994). Its goal was to establish a separate Kurdish state with Communist ideology as its foundation. It wouldn’t be until 1978 that Kongra-Gel would change its name to the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (FAS, 2004). Up until 1984, the PKK’s activities primarily involved political activism (FAS, 2004). Being frustrated at a lack of Turkish action to improve the conditions of its Kurdish population, the PKK’s leader and founder Abdullah Öcalan led the organization to begin an armed campaign against Turkish government and civilian targets in 1984 (FAS, 2004). Through the PKK’s use of violent tactics such as shootings, bombings, and kidnappings, these actions have resulted in the deaths of 35,000 people over the span of twenty years (Richardson, 67).

The PKK’s use of terrorist methods have not always been consistent. Along with several name changes, the group has attempted numerous ceasefires, including one in 1999 that lasted for five years (FAS, 2004). The PKK’s armed campaign has resumed since then. The primary motivation behind the PKK’s use of violence is derived from its Communist ideology.
from the successful Communist revolutions in China, Cuba, and Russia, the PKK believes that the only way that a sovereign Kurdish state will be established is through armed struggle against the Turkish government. The principal root cause behind the PKK’s use of terrorism appears to have evolved since its initial conception. In its earlier stages, the organization consisted primarily of college students who wanted to promote Marxist-Leninist ideals as a means of achieving Kurdish equality in a country that had long neglected this minority population (Kutschera, 1994). Since the PKK turned violent in 1984, however, its goal changed from seeking Kurdish rights within Turkey, to the creation of a separate Kurdish state based on Communist ideals. Because of this fusion of goals, the PKK is neither a nationalist nor ideologically-based terrorist organization. Instead, it is a hybrid of the two; an organization whose seeking of a national homeland stems from an ideological foundation.

**Hamas**

Hamas originates from a local Palestinian chapter of the Muslim brotherhood going as far back as the late 1920s. Its original goal was to act as a charity, cultural, and religious organization that used Islam as the basis of providing material assistance to the needy (Laqueur, 104). It continued these activities until the organization became politicized and radicalized in 1987, coinciding with both the beginning of the First Intifada in the same year, as well as deteriorating economic conditions in the Gaza Strip, Hamas’ base of operations (Laqueur, 105). It was also in 1987 that the organization officially established itself under the name ‘Hamas’. This new identity corresponded with the radicalization that was a prominent trend at the time, as much of the Muslim world was lending support to the popular uprising that was occurring against Israel in the West Bank and Gaza strip (Palestine Facts, 2009). The first of Hamas’ goals
is to overthrow the Israeli state through the use of violent means. They view Israel as a force of evil, and themselves as a force for good. This belief can be seen in Hamas’ charter, when they explain that their goal is to “extricate the country and the people from the [oppressors’] desecration, filth and evil”. The second of Hamas’ goals is the establishment of an Islamic state in Palestine. This is also illustrated in Hamas’ charter, when they state that another one of their goals is to “raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine”. Pursuant to these two goals, Hamas has engaged in numerous terrorist acts against both the Israeli government and civilian population. While Hamas’ center of influence has been mostly limited to the Gaza strip since its conflict with Fatah in 2006 over the controversial Palestinian legislative election of that year (BBC, 2007), it has been able to deal Israel a significant amount of damage. This was seen with Hamas’ ongoing rocket attacks in Israel from 2002 to 2005, and again from 2007 to 2008 (Global Security, 2009).

Much like Al Qaeda, Hamas legitimizes the use of violence on the basis that it is an essential component of the concept of jihad. This is also why Hamas opposes any and all peace treaties with Israel; because to do would be to recognize Israel as being legitimate, and it would conflict with their commitment to violent opposition towards the state. Hamas’ unwillingness to engage in peace treaties is explained in their charter, which states: “[Peace] initiatives, the so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement”. At the same time, Hamas’ use of violence against Israel benefits them, because it grants them popularity amongst the Palestinian population. This support was most clearly demonstrated in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election, which was won by the more radical Hamas, over the long-time running
moderate opposition, Fatah. For Hamas, the use of violence is based on both an ideological basis, as well as a political one.

Hamas is a prime example of a hybrid terrorist organization, because it draws such a clear connection between both its nationalist and religious goals. This connection is illustrated in Hamas’ charter:

“In other nationalisms consist of material, human and territorial considerations, the nationality of Hamas also carries, in addition to all those, the all important divine factors which lend to it its spirit and life; so much so that it connects with the origin of the spirit and the source of life and raises in the skies of the Homeland the Banner of the Lord, thus inexorably connecting earth with Heaven”

Like Al-Qaeda, Hamas derives its legitimacy through seeking an establishment based on the rule of Islamic law. However, unlike Al-Qaeda, Hamas focuses their efforts in establishing this Islamic society in Palestine alone, not as one single global caliphate for all Muslims to live under. Like the PLO, Hamas seeks the establishment of a national homeland for the Palestinians. Unlike the PLO, however, Hamas incorporates Islam into their view of how this state should be structure, while the PLO is primarily secular. Hamas’ incorporation of these nationalist goals based on a particular ideology is what categorizes them as a hybrid terrorist organization.

**Conclusion**

Simply categorizing each and every terrorist group in the Middle East into one of three categories can indeed be problematic. There are some outlying types of terrorism in existence that cannot fit into one of these categories. An example of such a group might be a state itself, as
some states in the Middle East engage in state terrorism; this can be seen with Iran, Libya and Syria. The reason why this type of terrorism does not merit to have its own lens of analysis, is because a state in itself engaging in terrorism is actually quite rare. More often than not, states engage in state-sponsored terrorism, in which case they grant support to an organization that will fit into one of the aforementioned categories. While each terrorist organization is unique in what brought them to the decision to use violence as a means to achieving their goals, a careful analysis of each organization reveals a number of similarities between them. As was illustrated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Al-Qaeda, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, and Hamas, these connections are strong and common enough to be able to categorize the motivations of most of the Middle East’s terrorist organizations into one of three types: nationalist, ideologically-based, or a hybrid of the two.

Works Cited


