



## International Terrorism

By Stephen Zunes

Recent U.S. presidents have claimed that international terrorism is a major threat to this country's national security and that the war against terrorism should be a major focus of U.S. foreign policy. This appeared to many observers to be hyperbole until the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

Despite a great deal of attention from the highest levels of government in recent years, when the attacks occurred, Washington was not ready, and there appeared to be little coherency in actual policy. As recently as 1998, Richard Davis of the General Accounting Office reported, "There does not seem to be any overall strategy to guide how we're spending money on counterterrorism" and, despite congressional eagerness to fund such efforts, there seems to be "no oversight, no priorities, no strategy, and much duplication." The multibillion-dollar blank check given to the Bush

administration to combat terrorism in the wake of the September 11 catastrophe raises fresh questions about how wisely such resources will be spent. Indeed, the fight against terrorism has been the justification for a series of controversial policies, including tougher immigration laws, high military and intelligence budgets, restrictions on civil liberties, sanctions against "rogue" states suspected of harboring terrorists, and arms shipments and training programs for repressive governments abroad.

Successive U.S. administrations have been criticized for using an overly narrow definition of terrorism—the killing of noncombatants by individuals or small groups of irregulars—while ignoring the

usually more widespread killings of equally innocent people by sanctioned organs of recognized states. Indeed, the U.S. has supported and continues to support governments that have engaged in widespread terrorism against their own populations. Furthermore, the U.S. has refused to cooperate fully in efforts to prosecute state terrorists—such as Chilean General Augusto Pinochet—when attempts are made to bring them to justice, and the Bush administration has opposed creation of the International Criminal Court.

Even using the more restricted definition of the term, however, the U.S. has demonstrated a propensity to ignore its own role in encouraging terrorism both as a reaction to its foreign policies and even, at times, as a direct tool in the implementation of its policies. Related to this double-standard is the ongoing U.S. support of the governments of Colombia, Turkey, and various Middle Eastern allies guilty of terrorism on a large scale by military, intelligence, or paramilitary units. Indeed, as the largest supplier of arms to the third world, and to the Middle East in particular, the U.S. provides potential terrorists easy access to weapons.

In recent decades, Washington has sponsored terrorist attacks and assassinations, either directly or through intermediaries. In the 1960s, right-wing Cuban exiles were organized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct a series of attacks inside Cuba that resulted in widespread civilian casualties. During the 1980s, the U.S. similarly organized, armed, and trained right-wing Nicaraguan exiles into an armed force that engaged in widespread attacks against civilian targets inside Nicaragua, resulting in the deaths of thousands.

Sometimes these U.S.-trained terrorists have subsequently used the skills and weapons they acquired against the interests of their trainers, as in the case of some supporters of the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance. Osama bin Laden and many of his followers were initially trained by the U.S. CIA in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s.

And double-standards have greatly hindered Washington's effectiveness in gaining international support and cooperation in the struggle against terrorism. Indeed, such hypocrisy raises the question of whether the U.S. is really opposed to terrorism in general or just to terrorism when it targets America and its allies.

There is nothing inherent in Islamic, Middle Eastern, Irish, Basque, or any other tradition that spawns terrorism. Terrorism by nonstate actors is primarily the weapon of the politically weak or frustrated—those who are (or believe themselves to be) unable to exert their grievances through conventional political or military means. However illegitimate terrorism may be, the political concerns that spawn such violence often have a reasonable basis. Effective intelligence, interdiction, and certain conventional counterterrorism efforts do have their place. But terrorism's roots are political, so ending the problem is at least as much a political issue as a security issue.

### Key Points

- The massive terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have placed the threat of terrorism on the front burner and have exposed the failure of the U.S. government to protect its citizens.
- The U.S. is using the threat of terrorism to justify a series of controversial policies, including tougher immigration laws, high military and intelligence budgets, and restrictions on civil liberties.
- Terrorism is rooted in political problems requiring political solutions and necessitating a major reevaluation of U.S. foreign policy as a whole.

# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

U.S. foreign policy toward international terrorism has been far too focused on military solutions. Though air strikes have played well with the American public, because they give the impression that Washington is taking decisive action to strike back at terrorists, in reality, the U.S. war against terrorism has often taken the form of foreign policy by catharsis.

Surgical air strikes may make sense in wartime, when the targets are heavy equipment, lethal weaponry, communications centers, and large concentrations of armed forces. But "terrorist bases" generally contain none of these. As a result, such air raids make little sense strategically.

In addition, targeting terrorist bases, which are often near populated areas, risks casualties among innocent civilians. In 1986, for instance, the U.S. bombed two Libyan cities in retaliation for suspected Libyan involvement in a terrorist attack at a Berlin discotheque in which two American GIs were killed. More than 60 civilians were killed in the retaliatory bombing, including Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's baby daughter.

Often such air strikes are based on faulty intelligence, such as the April 1993 bombing of a Baghdad neighborhood in reaction to an unsubstantiated allegation of an Iraqi assassination attempt against former President Bush. Likewise, in August 1998 the U.S. bombed a Sudanese pharmaceutical plant, claiming it was a chemical weapons plant controlled by Osama bin Laden. The Clinton administration subsequently refused to release the supposed evidence prompting these strikes or to allow independent investigations by the United Nations.

Rather than curbing terrorism, such strikes often escalate the cycle of violence, as terrorists seek further retaliation. In 1988, Libyan agents allegedly blew up a Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, in retaliation for the U.S. strikes against Libyan cities. Meanwhile Libyans, Iraqis, Palestinians, and other peoples victimized by U.S. bombing raids are likely to become more hostile toward the U.S. and more sympathetic to terrorists.

There are serious legal questions as well. International law prohibits the use of armed force except when a nation is under direct attack. The U.S. claims that Article 51 of the UN Charter allows such military actions, but Article 51 deals only with self-defense; neither retaliatory strikes nor preemptive strikes are included. The Bush administration has interpreted the Security Council resolution condemning the September 11 attack as authorizing U.S. military retaliation. The

resolution, however, lists steps the international community must take collectively to combat terrorism.

Another problem with U.S. policy is that Washington has itself sponsored international terrorism. Recently declassified U.S. documents reveal that in 1970, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger authorized a kidnapping that resulted in the death of the chief of Chile's armed forces. And the most serious single bombing attack against a civilian target in the modern Middle East was the March 1985 blast in a suburban Beirut neighborhood, killing 80 people and wounding 200 others. The attack was ordered by CIA Director William Casey and was approved by President Reagan as part of an unsuccessful effort to assassinate an anti-American Lebanese cleric. Such actions have given Washington's crusade against terrorism less credibility in much of the world.

Still another problem has been the politicization of the terrorism issue. For example, Syria and Cuba remain on the State Department's list of terrorist states, despite Washington's admission that it has found no evidence of terrorist involvement by either of those countries in more than a decade. More revealing still is the U.S. offer to drop such labels, which would allow for certain sanctions to be lifted, if the governments acquiesce to U.S. demands in unrelated policy areas. Similarly, some Palestinian groups have been labeled "terrorists" simply for opposing the U.S.-sponsored peace process, even though they have renounced terrorism and have limited their targets to uniformed Israeli occupation forces in the occupied territories, a response recognized as legitimate under international law.

U.S. double-standards also extend to the issue of extradition and sanctions. For example, Washington successfully pressured the United Nations to impose strict sanctions against Libya for its initial refusal to extradite two of its agents implicated in the Lockerbie bombing. But the U.S. has refused to extradite individuals—all of whom have ties to the CIA—charged with acts of terrorism in Venezuela and Costa Rica, including blowing up a Cuban airliner in 1976.

## Key Problems

- Retaliatory strikes against suspected terrorist targets are strategically ineffective and invite further retaliation from terrorists.
- Unilateral military actions are illegal under international law and often result in civilian casualties.
- The fact that the U.S. itself has sponsored terrorist attacks undercuts its credibility in trying to combat terrorism.

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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

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Although there is no foolproof set of policies that will protect the U.S. and its interests from terrorists, there are several policy shifts that would likely reduce the frequency and severity of terrorist strikes. The September 11 attacks represent a massive U.S. intelligence failure. There needs to be a rapid, thorough, and independent investigation into why the CIA and FBI failed to detect these terrorist networks, including their operations inside the United States. However, lifting the prohibition

on CIA assassinations and its use of “unsavory” characters is likely, as happened in the past, to increase subsequent terrorist acts by U.S.-financed operatives. Loosening controls on wire taps and other forms of domestic surveillance, without first fully unraveling the network behind the terrorist attacks, violates basic civil liberties, could unfairly target certain groups, and may not successfully curb terrorist activities.

Airport security, however, should be nationalized, and security officers must be better trained and better paid. Currently, airport security has been the responsibility of the

airlines and—in order to boost profits—has been contracted to outside security companies.

Given that terrorism is an international problem, it needs international solutions. This means vigorously and collaboratively pursuing diplomatic, investigative, and international police channels to identify, track down, arrest, and bring to justice members of terrorist cells. Precipitous and inappropriate military action could make many nations reluctant to cooperate in antiterrorism efforts, particularly in the Middle East, where support is crucial in hunting down terrorists hiding in that area.

Although the Bush administration needs international collaboration to effectively combat terrorism, it has set a dangerous precedent in weakening or walking away from a series of international treaties. Washington should support international conventions and institutions intended to help trace, punish, and prevent terrorism, including the International Criminal Court, tighter controls on money laundering, and curbs on small arms. In addition, the U.S. must work with other nations to support treaties curbing chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and materials, so that such weapons do not fall into the hands of terrorist networks or states that harbor these networks.

More fundamentally, the U.S. must recognize that terrorist cells that are not state-created or state-financed and that may claim religious sanction are generally bred by social isolation and political or economic desperation. These root causes must be addressed for antiterrorism efforts to have any chance of success. Crafting a Middle East policy based on the promotion of human

rights, international law, and sustainable development rather than on arms transfers, support for occupation armies and dictatorial governments, air strikes, and punitive sanctions would probably make the U.S. a lot safer.

The tactics of terrorists can never be justified. But the most effective weapons in the war against terrorism are measures that lessen the likelihood for the U.S. and its citizens to become targets. This means changing policies that victimize vulnerable populations. Such victims often hold the U.S. responsible for their suffering and thus become easy recruits for anti-American terrorism.

For example, Osama bin Laden’s key grievances—U.S. support for the Israeli occupation, its ongoing military presence on the Arabian Peninsula, the humanitarian consequences of the sanctions against Iraq, and support for corrupt Arab dictatorships—have resonance among the majority of the world’s Muslims. Very few Muslims support terrorism of any kind. Yet as long as there is such widespread hostility to Washington’s Middle East policy, it will not be difficult for terrorists to find willing recruits.

A related and essential policy change is the need to distinguish between fringe groups—such as bin Laden’s network—whose primary function is inflicting violence against innocent people, and popular, multifaceted organizations that also contain a terrorist component. In dealing with the former, aggressive measures may be appropriate, whereas a broader and more nuanced strategy is more appropriate in relating to the latter. And a careful distinction must be made between state-sponsored terrorist groups, which receive sanctuary without direct state support, and those that operate via independent, often international, networks. Confronting each requires a different strategy.

Finally, Washington needs to shift away from supporting irregular groups that may be prone to terrorism. Many of the world’s most notorious current terrorists once received training from the CIA as part of U.S. efforts to undermine leftist governments in Cuba, Nicaragua, or Afghanistan. Any direct involvement in acts of terrorism by any branch of the U.S. military, intelligence agencies, or any other part of the U.S. government must not be tolerated.

Simply addressing the security aspects of terrorism, as current U.S. policy does, will merely focus on the symptoms rather than the cause. The struggle against terrorism cannot be won until Washington also ceases its pursuit of policies that alienate such large segments of the international community, particularly in the Middle East and elsewhere in the third world.

The U.S. is a target of terrorists in large part due to its perceived arrogance, hypocrisy, and greed. Becoming a more responsible member of the international community will go a long way toward making the U.S. safer and ultimately stronger.

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## Key Recommendations

- America needs to make effective internal security measures a higher priority, but it must avoid sweeping reforms that unduly curb civil liberties or target particular ethnic groups.
  - Washington should support international conventions and institutions intended to help track, punish, and prevent terrorism and to curb the trade in small arms and chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and materials.
  - The U.S. needs to cooperate with the United Nations and other multilateral agencies to be effective in combating global terrorism.
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# Sources for More Information

## Publications

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<http://www.ceip.org/>

**Center for Democracy and Technology Counter-Terrorism Issues Page**  
<http://www.cdt.org/policy/terrorism/>  
The Center For Democracy and Technology "works for public policies that advance civil liberties and democratic values in new computer and communications technologies."

**Counter-Terrorism Page**  
<http://www.terrorism.net/>  
An attempt to "provide a single resource for people interested in the areas of terrorism, counterterrorism and international crime."

**Electronic Privacy Information Center Counter-Terrorism Proposals**  
<http://www.epic.org/privacy/terrorism/>  
EPIC aims "to focus public attention on emerging civil liberties issues and to protect privacy, the first amendment, and constitutional values."

**Emergency Response & Research Institute Counter-Terrorism Page**  
<http://www.emergency.com/cntrterr.htm>  
The Emergency Response & Research Institute (ERRI) addresses such issues as anti-terrorism, counter-terrorism, open source intelligence gathering, and crisis management skills.

**Federation of American Scientists**  
<http://www.fas.org/>

**Fund for Peace**  
<http://www.fundforpeace.org/>

**Henry L. Stimson Center**  
<http://www.stimson.org/>

**International Association of Counterterrorism & Security Professionals**  
<http://www.securitynet.net/>  
Securitynet is being built by the IACSP (International Association of Counterterrorism & Security Professionals) to "provide professionals in the law enforcement, military, government, and corporate security industry a comprehensive intelligence network that will provide the necessary tactical and educational information to prepare and hopefully deter terrorism in all of its forms in the fast-approaching 21st century."

**Strategic Assessment Center**  
<http://sac.saic.com/>

**Terrorism Research Center**  
<http://www.terrorism.com/>  
The Terrorism Research Center provides information on terrorism and information warfare.

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