

Terrorist Groups and Political Legitimacy

Terrorist groups can never change their stripes, or so politicians regularly remind their citizens. Yet history begs to differ.

Backgrounder by Michael Moran, *Prepared by*
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Introduction

For decades, refusing to negotiate with or recognize terrorists has been a basic precept of U.S. foreign policy. As President Bush said in 2002, "Terror must be stopped. No nation can negotiate with terrorists. For there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death." Democratic Party members, too, use this terminology, as do politicians abroad.

Yet recent history suggests that precept may not reflect the realities of modern international politics or the way the United States or other nations actually practice diplomacy. Some groups will always remain, as the English kings used to say of ungovernable parts of Ireland, "beyond the Pale." Al-Qaeda may be one of them. Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist organization wrestling with how to react to its electoral

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However, over the past several decades, some groups widely shunned as terrorists by the international community have managed to beat a well-worn path to negotiations, political legitimacy, and even sovereign power. Here is a look at some prominent transformations.

African National Congress (ANC)

Just twenty years ago, Nelson Mandela sat in prison and black South Africans were forbidden from even spending the night in their country's largest cities. U.S. officials helped justify dealings with the apartheid government by pointing to the ANC's place on the State Department's list of terrorist groups.

After a half-century of practicing nonviolence and community activism, the ANC founded a military wing in 1961 that targeted government facilities, the South African military, and some foreign businesses. In the late 1980s, President FW de Klerk, a man sometimes called "the South African Gorbachev," released Mandela from jail and began talks to bring blacks into the political process. The ANC became a legal political party in 1990, and Mandela was elected president in 1994, just a year after he and de Klerk shared the Nobel Peace Prize. South Africa's current president, Thabo Mbeki, was a key Mandela deputy throughout the ANC's many years in the political wilderness. He remains the most influential of the ANC's leaders.

Hezbollah

The group is best remembered in the United States for the 1983 bombings of the U.S.

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Israeli pullout, it astutely harvested the admiration it won inside southern Lebanon and launched itself into mainstream politics. In Lebanon, at least, this required no formal renunciation of violence.

Today, Hezbollah holds twenty-three seats in the Lebanese parliament. The group is engaged in talks with other political parties inside Lebanon. However, Hezbollah is under increasing pressure from other parties in Lebanon to disarm and renounced violence. Many in Lebanon fear the failure of Hezbollah to renounce violence will encourage rival factions in Lebanon to rearm and reignite civil war. In the meantime, Hezbollah continues to be designated as a terrorist entity by the U.S. State Department, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently lobbied the Lebanese government to insist Hezbollah disarm. Washington also has criticized the European Union for failing to include Hezbollah on its list of terrorist entities since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

The group was founded in the early 1990s during a backlash against Serbian efforts to eliminate ethnic Albanian political influence inside the former Yugoslavia. President Bill Clinton's special envoy to the Balkans, Robert Gelbard, described the KLA as, "without any questions, a terrorist group." The KLA engaged in tit-for-tat attacks with Serbian nationalists in Kosovo, reprisals against ethnic Albanians who "collaborated" with the Serbian government, and bombed police stations and cafes known to be frequented by Serb officials, killing innocent civilians in the process. Most of its activities were funded by drug running, though its ties to community groups and

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1999. After the war, the KLA was transformed into the Kosovo Protection Corps, which now works alongside NATO forces patrolling the province. Talks aimed at determining Kosovo's final status continue, and in March, the KLA's former leader, Agim Ceku, was elected prime minister of the province.

Irish Republican Army (IRA)

During a period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, the provisional IRA was the most notorious of Western Europe's nationalist terrorist groups. In quest of a British withdrawal from the province of Northern Ireland, the group assassinated its enemies and set off bombs in pubs, department stores, restaurants, and other locations frequented by civilians in the province and in Britain.

The IRA funded its activities through a combination of bank heists, extortion, and, to a lesser degree, fundraising among Irish émigrés in North America and Australia. The failure of Northern Ireland's police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to win the trust of local Catholics and to restrain so-called loyalist terrorists who conducted retaliation attacks against Catholics gave the IRA, by default, a huge role in civic life in Catholic neighborhoods.

By the late 1980s, however, a military stalemate convinced the IRA's political wing, Sinn Féin, to open secret talks with the British government that ultimately resulted in a ceasefire. The talks, facilitated by U.S. diplomacy, enraged local unionists, who want Northern Ireland to remain a part of the United Kingdom. But the resulting peace process ended most of the violence and forced the IRA to pledge to disarm, resulting in

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at the White House each St. Patrick's Day.

As with the 1921 partition of Ireland, however, the 1998 "Good Friday Accords" led disgruntled hardliners to found several splinter groups that continue to threaten violence, most notably, the Real IRA, which bombed a public square in the Northern Ireland town of Omagh in 1998 that killed twenty-nine civilians, the largest-single death toll in the history of the conflict. The IRA was removed from the State Department's listing of terrorist groups following the Good Friday Accords. Real IRA and another group of violent dissenters, Continuity IRA, remain on it.

Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

Founded in the early 1960s to eliminate Israel, the PLO was the prototypical terrorist group through much of the second half of the twentieth century. The group actually was an umbrella organization for a host of Palestinian factions espousing ideologies ranging from Marxism to radical Islamic militancy, but its dominant faction, Fatah, was led by Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the PLO waged a terrorist war against Israeli targets around the world, hijacking aircraft, bombing hotels, restaurants and military bases, and targeting for assassination any politician thought to be conducting unauthorized contacts with the enemy. The PLO also styled itself as protector of the millions of displaced Palestinians living in refugee camps in Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere—a role that lent it legitimacy in the eyes of average Palestinians and set it up as a conduit for funds from Arab states eager to appear to be actively confronting Israel but not eager

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so-called Oslo process, led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. The talks also led the U.S. State Department to take the PLO off its list of foreign terrorist organizations in 1994, followed over the next several years by several other Palestinian factions. However, many Palestinian groups broke with the PLO's main faction over the Oslo Accords, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and older left-wing and Syrian-controlled factions.

While talks frequently have faltered and violence has flared, the PA continues to administer parts of what once was considered Israeli-occupied territory. The victory of the radical terrorist group Hamas in January elections has cast leaders of the Fatah movement, ironically, as the doves of Palestinian politics.

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