A History of Terror Attacks

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Hijacked United Airlines Flight 175 crashes into the south tower, while the north tower burns, of the World Trade Center complex in New York City during the September 11, 2001, terror attacks. Photo from: Wikimedia

People who carry out acts of terror use fear to try to change society. They create fear by committing violent crimes. Today, many countries consider terrorism to be more dangerous than enemy armies.

Not all people who carry out terror attacks want the same thing. Some want to overthrow a government. They are called revolutionary terrorists. Examples include the Red Brigades in Italy in the 1970s and the Shining Path in Peru in the 1980s and 1990s. Both groups wanted to establish their own governments.

Other groups who do acts of terror want independence for a particular group. In northern Spain, a group called ETA has been fighting for a homeland for the Basque people. In Sri Lanka, a group called the Liberation Tigers seeks a homeland for the Tamil people. Several Palestinian groups want to start a Palestinian state in the Middle East and to do that by weakening or destroying Israel.

Some people who carry out acts of terror are against minority groups. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was formed in the United States in the 1860s to prevent African-Americans from voting. Later, the KKK also targeted Catholics, Jews and other groups.
Sometimes the rulers of a country practice another kind of terrorism by killing their own citizens. Such rulers want to make people afraid to go against their power. Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein of Iraq ruled by terror.

**Weapons come in all shapes and sizes**

People who do acts of terror often use bombs. They might carry bombs in cars, in suitcases, or strapped to their bodies. They might also send bombs in packages. People called suicide bombers intend to die when they set off their explosives.

Sometimes they release chemicals or other harmful substances. In 1995, a Japanese group released poison gas into the subway system in the city of Tokyo. Twelve people were killed. In 2001, five people died in the United States after someone mailed letters containing the disease anthrax.

Groups that do terror also kidnap or assassinate (murder) leaders. Or they might hijack, or seize, boats or airplanes. Sometimes they hold the passengers as hostages until their demands are met.

**Acts of terror grew in the 20th century**

The word terrorism was first used in the French Revolution, which began in 1789. It described the way some of the revolutionary leaders punished those who opposed their actions.

In the late 1800s, people called anarchists started to use acts of terror. Anarchists want to do away with all government. An anarchist killed U.S. President William McKinley in 1901. Anarchists also killed several European leaders.

In the 1900s more groups used terror than ever before. One reason is that deadly weapons became easier to get. Another reason is that airplane travel allowed new ways to commit violence. Many of the terror groups had political goals. Others had very strong religious beliefs.

**President Bush’s war**

In September 2001, members of a group called al-Qaeda hijacked four airplanes in the United States. They crashed three of them into buildings. Their targets included the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon, near Washington, D.C. It was the deadliest terror act up to that time. About 3,000 people were killed.

Soon afterward, U.S. President George W. Bush declared a “war on terror.” U.S. forces located and killed al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, in 2011.