A History of Terror Attacks

By Encyclopaedia Britannica, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.26.17

People who carry out acts of terror use violence in an attempt to achieve political goals. They want to bring about political change by creating fear within the society they oppose. To do that, they often target innocent victims and famous locations.

For centuries, terrorism was used by governments to create fear in its own people. It has also been a tool for revolutionaries who want to overthrow governments. During the last half of the 20th century, terror events increased dramatically throughout the world.

Several organizations that carried out terror activities emerged in the late 1960s. Their members traveled across national borders and often trained together in camps in Cuba, Libya, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States labeled 29 groups as foreign terrorist organizations.
Acts of terror can have a mission

The goals of these groups varied. Some groups, such as Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network, were Islamic extremists. They wanted to overthrow secular, or non-religious, governments, mostly in countries with large Muslim populations.

Other groups were nationalistic. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) wanted the British to get out of Northern Ireland. They wanted to combine it with Ireland into a single nation free of British control. The goal of many Palestinian groups was to establish an independent Palestinian state and to weaken or destroy the State of Israel.

Terror acts include murder, kidnapping for ransom, airplane hijackings, and bombings. Some groups began suicide bombing. The suicide bomber could destroy an important economic, military or political target by crashing into it with an airplane or an automobile carrying explosives. Some suicide bombers carried bombs on their bodies.

During the 1960s, many terror groups resorted to bank robbery and kidnapping for ransom to collect money. Organizations continue to use these tactics. Some groups receive donations from people who support their cause.

In the United States, the Ku Klux Klan grew during the 1920s because of money they got selling memberships, costumes and publications. In the late 1970s, the IRA received money from Irish-American sympathizers. Some countries, such as Cuba and Libya, also helped fund acts of terror.

When in Rome

Terror has been practiced throughout history. The Roman Emperors Tiberius and Caligula killed people to discourage opposition to their rule.

Starting in the late 1400s, the Spanish Inquisition used torture and execution to punish people who, in their minds, went against the Catholic religion. After the American Civil War, angry Southerners formed the Ku Klux Klan to threaten the newly freed former slaves.

In the latter half of the 19th century, terror was adopted in Western Europe, Russia, and the United States by anarchists. They wanted revolutionary change, which they tried to bring about by assassinating politicians. From 1865 to 1905, various kings, presidents, prime ministers and other government officials were killed by anarchists’ guns or bombs.

Terror for social change

The 20th century witnessed great changes in the use of terror. It was carried out by both extreme people on the left, who wanted social change, and extreme conservatives, who wanted to preserve tradition.
Groups that did terrorism had more access to deadly weapons, such as automatic weapons and small explosives. In the 1960s, more people than ever were flying on planes. This gave new opportunities for terror. On July 23, 1968, a group of terrorists from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked one of Israel’s El Al planes in Rome, Italy, and forced its pilot to fly it to Algeria. This event is considered to be the first modern terror attack. According to the United States Department of State, between 1968 and 1987 the number of international terror incidents increased more than 600 percent.

Some of the most notorious acts of terror occurred in Europe. Israeli athletes in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany were captured and killed by a Palestinian organization called Black September. A group called the Red Brigades organized the assassination of Aldo Moro, a former prime minister of Italy, in 1978. Particularly deadly was the bombing of commuter trains in Madrid, Spain, in 2004, by a group inspired by al-Qaeda. About 190 people were killed and another 1,500 wounded.

In the late 20th century the United States suffered several acts of violence. These were carried out by various groups, including some who wanted Puerto Rican independence, antiabortion groups and foreign organizations.

"First war of the 21st century"

The 1990s witnessed some of the deadliest attacks on U.S. soil. The World Trade Center in New York City was bombed in 1993. The 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, killed 168 people. Several major terror attacks on U.S. government targets occurred overseas. In 2000, suicide bombers caused the deaths of 17 sailors aboard a U.S. Navy ship, the USS Cole, in the sea off of Yemen.

Suicide bombing reached a new level of destruction on September 11, 2001. Terrorist attacks struck two major symbols of U.S. business and military strength. Suicide bombers hijacked four airplanes, crashing two of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. They also crashed one into the Pentagon near Washington, D.C.; the fourth plane crashed in a field in Western Pennsylvania.

The combined death toll of the attacks included 265 people aboard the four planes and an estimated 2,760 people in the buildings and nearby areas. Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network were believed to be responsible.

In response to the attacks, United States President George W. Bush announced that the country would fight terrorism as the "first war of the 21st century." The Office of Homeland Security was established to create a national strategy to fight it in the United States. The United States also called on other governments to join it in an alliance against terror. These counties would share information and support each other’s efforts to fight terror organizations.

The United Nations, an organization that many countries belong to, made a new rule. They required all its member nations to search for groups that do terrorism and anyone who supported them.
Stepped-up efforts against terror

As part of their “war on terrorism,” the U.S. and British governments overthrew Afghanistan’s Taliban government in 2001. They accused the Taliban of letting bin Laden stay in their country. The United States and British also removed the dictator of Iraq, which they accused of developing “weapons of mass destruction,” in 2003.

Since the late 1960s, there have been thousands of terror-related deaths. Mostly, it was innocent civilians who were killed.

As the terror attacks increased, many countries started new security plans to prevent them. U.S. military and police departments have learned how to fight terror attacks.

But it is not easy for several reasons. Some countries still help organizations that commit acts of terror with money, weapons, safe havens and bases of operation. There has also been worry that these groups might obtain more deadly weapons, such as nuclear bombs or poison gases.

In the history of modern terrorism, few individual governments have been able to find ways to totally prevent it.