A History of Terror Attacks

Groups that carry out terror attacks use violence in an attempt to achieve political goals. Their intent is to bring about political change by creating a climate of fear within the society they oppose. The targeting of innocent victims and symbolic locations for a high-profile attack is the preferred method of terror organizations.

For centuries, terrorism was an instrument of repression by governments as well as a tool of revolutionaries trying to overthrow governments. During the last half of the 20th century, acts of terror increased dramatically throughout the world.

Several organizations that carried these out emerged in the late 1960s. Their members traveled across national borders and often trained together in guerrilla camps in Cuba, Libya, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Some of the best-known organizations that carried out acts of terror in the late 20th century were Germany’s Baader-Meinhof Gang (Red Army Faction); the Red Brigades in Italy; the Japanese Red Army; the Provisional Irish Republican Army; the Ulster Defense Association; the Palestine Liberation Front and other groups at one time related to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); the Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN); Hamas; the Weathermen; and the Ku Klux Klan.
Growth of terror groups in the new century

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States designated 29 groups as foreign terror organizations. Among the most visible of these organizations were AUM Shinrikyo in Japan; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka; the Abu Nidal Organization (Black September) and Hezbollah (Party of God) in Lebanon; the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru; and al-Qaeda.

The goals of these groups varied. Some groups, such as Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda network, were Islamic extremists wanting to overthrow secular governments in countries with large Muslim populations. Other groups were purely nationalistic. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) wanted the British to get out of Northern Ireland and to unite the two Irelands into a single nation. The FALN sought an independent Puerto Rico. Basque fighters in northern Spain wanted to establish an independent homeland. The goal of many Palestinian groups was to establish an independent Palestinian country and to weaken or destroy Israel.

Terrorist tactics include murder, kidnapping for ransom, arson, train holdups, attacks on embassies, airplane hijackings and bombings. Some groups adopted the tactic of suicide bombing. The suicide bomber could destroy an important economic, military, political or symbolic target by crashing into it with an airplane or explosives-laden automobile. Or, the bomber might detonate a bomb carried on their body.

During the 1960s, many groups that carried out acts of terror resorted to bank robbery and kidnapping for ransom to obtain funds. Although later organizations continued to use these tactics, some groups were also given money from outside sources. Groups often received donations from people who supported their cause. In the United States, the Ku Klux Klan flourished during the 1920s because of money derived from the sale of memberships, costumes and publications. In the late 1970s the IRA was assisted by extensive funding from Irish-American sympathizers. Some countries, such as Cuba and Libya, also helped fund terror groups. Palestinian organizations received large amounts of money from oil-rich Arab nations that wanted Israel overthrown.

Acts of terror through the ages

Terror has been practiced throughout history. The 4th century B.C. Greek historian Xenophon wrote of the effectiveness of psychological warfare against enemy populations. The Roman Emperors Tiberius and Caligula executed people to discourage opposition to their rule. The most commonly cited example of early terror, however, is the activity of the Jewish Zealots who attacked fellow Hebrews suspected of aiding the Romans.

Starting in the late 1400s, the Spanish Inquisition used torture and execution to punish what it viewed as religious heresy. During the French Revolution, Robespierre openly supported the use of terror. After the American Civil War, defiant Southerners formed the Ku Klux Klan to
intimidate 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. The anarchists believed that revolutionary change was brought about by political assassination. From 1865 to 1905, a number of kings, presidents, prime ministers and other government officials were killed by anarchists’ guns or bombs.

The 20th century witnessed great changes in the use of terror. Political movements stretching from the extreme right to the extreme left of the political spectrum resorted to acts of terror. The availability of automatic weapons and small, electrically detonated explosives gave groups a new lethality. In the 1960s, the growth of international air travel provided new methods and opportunities. On July 23, 1968, a group from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked one of Israel’s El Al airliners in Rome, Italy, and forced its pilot to fly it to Algeria. This event is considered to be the first contemporary 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 terrorism occurred in Europe. One attack was the kidnapping and murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany, by a Palestinian organization called Black September. In 1978, there was the assassination of Aldo Moro, a former prime minister of Italy, by the Red Brigades. Particularly deadly was the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, which killed 270 people. And in 2004, a group inspired by al-Qaeda bombed trains in Madrid, Spain, killing about 190 people and wounding about 1,500 more.

**Increased attacks on U.S. soil**

In the late 20th century the United States suffered several acts of violence by Puerto Rican nationalists (such as the FALN), antiabortion groups, and foreign-based organizations. During the 1960s there were numerous instances of bombings, whippings, and shootings in Southern communities. These were carried out in secret but apparently the work of the Ku Klux Klan. The 1990s witnessed some of the deadliest attacks on U.S. soil, including the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City in 1993 and the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, which killed 168 people. Several major terror attacks on U.S. government targets occurred overseas. There were attacks on military bases in Saudi Arabia (1996) and the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998). In 2000, an explosion triggered by suicide bombers caused the deaths of 17 sailors aboard a U.S. Navy ship, the USS Cole, in the Yemeni port of Aden.

Suicide bombing reached a new level of death and destruction on September 11, 2001. In the worst attack on the United States since the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, terror attacks struck two major symbols of U.S. business and military strength. Suicide bombers hijacked four commercial airplanes, crashing two of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City and one into the Pentagon near Washington, D.C.; the fourth plane crashed in a field in Western Pennsylvania. The crashes resulted in the destruction or
severe damage of much of the World Trade Center complex and the destruction of the southwest side of the Pentagon. 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 effect 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 by sharing information and supporting each other’s efforts to combat terror organizations. Soon thereafter, the United Nations Security Council passed a binding resolution requiring its member nations to pursue terrorists and their political and financial supporters. In another sign of international cooperation, 19 nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization agreed that a terror attack on any one of their nations was an attack on all.

**Terror delivered via U.S. mail**

In late 2001, envelopes containing anthrax were mailed to several U.S. government and media offices. The attacks killed five people, infected more, and caused widespread fear.

As part of their broad “war on terrorism,” the U.S. and British governments overthrew Afghanistan’s Taliban government, which they accused of harboring bin Laden, in 2001, and the government of Iraq, which they accused of developing “weapons of mass destruction,” in 2003. The Office of Homeland Security was transformed into a U.S. Cabinet department in 2003.

Since the late 1960s there have been thousands of terror-related deaths, mostly of innocent civilians. But groups that carry out terror attacks have rarely been successful in achieving their goals. Lebanese groups did drive U.S. military forces out of Beirut after a bombing in 1983 of a barracks in which nearly 250 Marines were killed. As the incidents of terror increased, many countries adopted precautions and security measures to prevent terror activities on their soil. As a result, the military, intelligence and security agencies, and police departments began to learn how to combat terrorism.

Contributing to the difficulties in combating terror were countries that supplied organizations with money, arms, safe haven and bases of operation. There also was widespread concern that groups that carry out acts of terror might gain access to biological, chemical or nuclear weapons. In the history of modern terrorism, few individual governments were able to find effective methods to prevent terrorism completely.