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17.586 Warlords, Terrorists, and Militias: Theorizing on Violent Non-State Actors
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Week VIII Discussion: State-Sponsored Terrorism

Reading: Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism (2005), Daniel Byman, Chapters 1-3, 9

Relevant Materials: “Overview of State-Sponsored Terrorism” (2004), US State Department, Available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2003/31644.htm>

“Iran: A Quarter-Century of State-Sponsored Terror” (2005), Congressional Hearing, Available at <http://www.internationalrelations.house.gov/archives/109/98810.PDF>

Introduction

The definition of state-sponsored terrorism, as with the definition of terrorism itself, is not clear-cut, and therefore leads to difficulty in recognizing and addressing states and their ties with terrorist organizations. To properly categorize the entire range of state-sponsored terrorism, it is necessary to understand why states sponsor or turn a blind eye to terrorist activities. It is also important to establish the motivations for terrorist groups seeking state assistance, even when the ideologies of the terrorist group and state differ significantly. It is important to recognize that many state sponsors of terrorism have also directly engaged in terrorist activities. Lastly, it is necessary to distinguish between insurgent groups and terrorist groups, though this distinction is not always simple.

Overview of Deadly Connections, Chapters 1-3, 9

Daniel Byman states that many varieties of state-sponsored terrorism exist, and that a failure to recognize the different and dynamic relationships that often exists between states and sponsors hinders counter-terrorism. The starting point for developing an understanding of state-sponsored terrorism is clearly defining terrorism. Byman uses Hoffman’s five distinguishing characteristics to define terrorism (see page 8), adding on the feature that terrorism deliberately targets non-combatants (although the definition of non-combatants may be argued; in Byman’s definition the attack on the USS Cole was not terrorism). In Byman’s analysis, he excludes acts by individuals and terrorist acts by state agencies as a means of painting a clearer picture of what constitutes state-sponsored terrorism.

One must also ascertain what constitutes support of a terrorist group or act. Byman helps characterize the range of support by identifying a state’s degree of support for terrorists, along with the states capacity (see Figure 1.1, p. 11). For example, the Afghan Taliban had a high degree of support for al-Qa’ida, but was a relatively weak government, so it had a low capacity for supporting the organization. Iran, for example, has a high capacity for sponsorship, and supports the terrorist group Hizballah to a high degree. To complicate matters, forms of intentional assistance by states such as Iran or the Afghan Taliban, can be broken down further into support via training and operations;

money, arms, and logistics; diplomatic backing; organizational assistance; ideological direction; or sanctuary (see Table 3.0, p. 55). Each form of intentional assistance relates to the needs of the terrorist organization and the wants of the state sponsor. In the case of al-Qa'ida, sanctuary was a more than adequate form of assistance provided by the Taliban regime. Iran has provided all forms of assistance to Hizballah, along with many forms of assistance to Palestinian organizations and other groups.

Typically, state sponsors will align with terrorist organizations that hold similar ideological beliefs or religious views. However, sometimes connections will form that seem counterintuitive, such as that between Libya and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, or connections that cross Sunni/Shi'a lines. These alliances, however, are often crafted with the strategic goals of the state sponsor in mind. For example, Libya supplied the PIRA with massive amounts of small arms in order to exact "revenge" for Britain's part in the 1986 bombing against Libya. Additionally, although there is little evidence that Iran has offered material support to al-Qa'ida, Iran has provided sanctuary to its members in the past due to the goals of both Iran and al-Qa'ida of destabilizing US interests in the region.

Byman repeatedly states that terrorism is the tool of the weak. The main motivation for states to sponsor terrorist organizations is strategic in nature, oftentimes with the end goal of destabilizing neighbors that pose a threat and furthering that states power. Many terrorist groups act in insurgencies, but Byman points out that insurgents and terrorists should be treated separately. Power projection is another key aspect of state strategy in sponsoring terrorism. Terrorist networks allow for states with smaller conventional military capabilities to carry out attacks and assassinations far from their borders. Sponsorship of terrorist organizations can also bolster the states interests in oppositional parties abroad. For example, Syria backed Abu Masa to counter the rise to power of the Fatah faction in Palestine. More rarely, states can use terrorist organizations to change regimes abroad. Although strategic reasons explain the majority of state ties to terrorism, ideological reasons may also influence ties, as is the case with Iran and the SCIRI for the purpose of exporting the Islamic revolution internationally, or Iraq's backing of Palestinian groups to gain prestige in the Arab world. Domestic politics also motivate states to sponsor terrorism, whether it is to aid friendly groups and bolster support for the regime or to gain aid in the assassinations of rivals and other activities. Although Byman distinguishes between strategic concerns, ideology, and domestic politics as motivating factors for states to sponsor terrorism (see Table 2.0, p. 27), one could argue that ideology and domestic politics also fall under strategic concerns.

Moving down the spectrum of state sponsorship, we see the classification of what Byman calls unwilling hosts, such as Somalia. However, Byman explains that states in these groups are not supporters, but rather victims of terrorism. Passive supporters, on the other hand, form a gray area, where they may not actively support a terrorist group, but do not actively attempt to interfere with it. Saudi Arabia is one such passive supporter, and Byman even suggests that Greece falls into this category for failing to arrest the November 17 movement, and the US for allowing the IRA to raise money within its borders. Pakistan may fit into the passive support category with respect to some groups, but was clearly a strong supporter with respect to its backing of Kashmiri groups against India.

States turn to terrorist groups when they feel they have no other alternatives. States play the terrorist organizations to their own advantage, realizing that there will always be a level of deniability, thereby making retribution from target states less likely. Additionally, state sponsors allow attacks that obtain their strategic goals, but keep attacks limited enough in scope or size so as not to warrant severe retaliation or the launching of an all-out war by the target state. States sponsor terrorism because they can get away with it while achieving small goals and advance their position. For many state sponsors, secrecy is an important aspect in limiting reprisals from the target state or international community. Secrecy is one of the aspects that makes combating state-sponsored terrorism so difficult in these cases, as intelligence is usually limited. Additionally, counterterrorism is hindered due to limited access to leadership and logistical elements of the terrorist organization, as they typically take shelter in the sponsoring state. Similarly, state sponsors' sheltering of terrorists makes criminal prosecution of these terrorists nearly impossible.

Discussion

Currently the US State Department lists Cuba, Iran, Sudan, and Syria as state sponsors of terrorism. North Korea was removed from the list in 2008 for not having any direct ties to terrorist acts since the 1987 bombing of a South Korean airline. Does the US State Department's list accurately represent what one would consider the state sponsors of terrorism in the world today? Certainly, Iran, Sudan, and Syria fit into Byman's definition. However, the classification of Cuba as a state sponsor of terror is less clear. The State Department explains that Cuba is a state sponsor of terrorism for sheltering fugitives and terrorist suspects from US authorities, along with opposing the US global war on terror. States such as Pakistan, which are not included on the list, are arguably more significant state sponsors of terrorism than Cuba. Although North Korea has supposedly abandoned its sponsorship of terrorist activities, its wartime strategy calls for asymmetric, terrorist activities against non-combatants. Along these lines, how does state terrorism (terrorist activities perpetrated by a state or its agents) fit into the context of state-sponsored terrorism? Although Byman specifically excludes these cases from his analysis, should they be included?

What steps should the US government take to eliminate or reduce Iran's sponsorship of terrorist organizations? Have sanctions and isolation over the past several decades worked? Iran's sponsorship of Hizballah is one of the most clear-cut examples of state-sponsored terrorism, yet it continues to the present. What effect does the Arab world viewing Hizballah and many Palestinian terrorist organizations as legitimate resistance movements have on Israeli and US counterterrorism efforts?

Although terrorist groups may seek sponsorship for legitimacy, money and arms, or other reasons, state sponsorship can also have negative consequences for the terrorist organizations. State sponsorship can be ambivalent, and often states pit one organization against another. Additionally, states often mold or restrict terrorist organizations to suit their own purposes. Nonetheless, terrorist organizations continue to seek and accept support from sponsors, and states continue to sponsor terrorists if it suits their political and strategic goals.