



Iran: Is it really the leading state-sponsor of terrorism?

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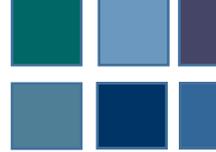
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Introduction

Charges of sponsoring terrorism have surrounded Iran from the earliest days of the Islamic revolution (1979) to the present. The United States (US), along with the rest of the West have repeatedly stated that Iran is the principal state sponsor of terrorism, providing a wide array of weaponry funds, safe harbour and logistical support to Shi'ite and occasionally Sunni terrorist groups (this paper will solely focus on Hamas and Hezbollah). In some cases, it is also claimed that Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) directly perpetrate acts of terrorism (Stearns 2012). Essentially, among analysts and academics it is commonly argued that Iran utilises 'terrorism' to pursue its foreign policy objectives.

However, terrorism is a murky and highly ambiguous term, and the United Nations (UN) has yet to succeed on forming a consensus on defining terrorism. Iran is often accused for funding 'terror groups' such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and although violence has been committed by these groups, it is however challenging to declare whether these groups fall under the category of 'terrorism'. From an Iranian standpoint, they are considered resistance movements. Therefore, the questions that should be asked are: Does Iran really fund terrorism and if Iran is claimed to be a 'state sponsor of terrorism' could the same not be said for the US and its allies, especially in the Middle East?

With this in mind, this paper will first explore different definitions of terrorism and thereafter, look into arguments that express Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Definitions of terrorism

The UN General Assembly Resolution 49/60 (1994) has a provision describing terrorism as "Criminal acts, intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them".

However, this description is often viewed as too broad and vague, thus leading UN Member States still having no agreed-upon definition of terrorism. This in fact has been a significant hindrance towards establishing meaningful international countermeasures.

In terms of countries, each country defines terrorism differently. For example the Russian Federation article 205 of the Criminal Code of 1996, defines terrorism as "perpetration of an explosion, arson or any other action endangering the lives of [individuals], causing sizable property damage, or entailing other socially dangerous consequences, if these actions have been committed for the purpose of violating public security, frightening the population, or exerting influence on



decision making by governmental bodies, and also the threat of committing said actions for the same [purposes]”. In contrast, according to the US’s Federal Bureau Investigation (2002-2005:iv), in the Code of Federal Regulations terrorism is viewed as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives”.

Academic definitions such as Wruth (1941:119) express that terrorism “is a method of action which the agent tends to produce terror to impose his domination on the State in order to transform or destroy it”. However, Rapport (1977:1853-1856) states that terrorism is “the use of violence to provoke consciousness, to evoke certain feelings of sympathy and revulsion”. Alexander (1976: xiv) defines terrorism as “the use of violence against random civilian targets in order to intimidate or to create [generalised] pervasive fear for the purpose of achieving political goals”.

Terrorism is essentially a controversial and challenging term to define, each country and each author will define it differently according to their interest, beliefs and values. Overall, it is also evident that the target, degree of violence and purpose of terrorism differs with each definition. With the combined elements of the above definitions, this paper will therefore define terrorism as being aimed at “non-combatants for the purpose of “revenge, intimidating or [influencing] the population” by utilising tactics such as bombings, hijacking, kidnapping, and mutilation (Stern & Berger 2015: 9). In conjunction to this, state-sponsored terrorism will be defined as a “state’s deliberate use of terrorism or assistance to terrorist organizations as a foreign policy tool against other countries or groups of [individuals]. It can refer to either direct attacks by the state or support of terrorist organisations through the [allocation] of weapons, funds, training, and sanctuary” (Karam 2017).

Iran and terrorism

In the US Country Reports on Terrorism the State Department stated that Iran was the planet’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism in 2016. According to this report, Iran backs anti-Israel groups as well as proxies in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. In addition, Iran supports’ Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement and continues to recruit from Afghanistan and Pakistan for Shi’te militia members to fight in Syria and Iraq (Lee 2017). Essentially, Iran’s relationship with terrorist and militant groups is viewed as an essential component of Iran’s foreign policy (Byman 2017). This section will thus explore a few authors’ points of view on Iran’s motivations for utilising terrorism. According to Sick (2003: 85), one of Iran’s historical motivations for terrorism was ideological, Iran’s major goal was to ‘export its revolution to the world’. For instance, in the years directly after the revolution, “Iranian militants with



or without the official support of the government, attempted to export the revolution by stirring up radical Islamist discontent in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states” (2003: 85).

However, as stated by Byman (2015) since the Iranian revolution Iran’s reasoning for backing terrorism has changed. Iran’s current incentive to support terrorism is seen as being driven by strategic goals as opposed to ideological factors. A few strategic rationales include (Byman 2015: 3-4):

- **Undermining and bleeding rivals** – Iran utilises terror groups to weaken governments it opposes.
- **Power Projection** - this is essential especially in terms of its role as a regional and emerging power. Thus, working with terror groups is a means for the country to influence events beyond its borders. For example, “Iran’s [support] for Hezbollah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Hamas make Iran a [major] player in the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab disputes. In addition, “Iran’s [support] of Houthis in Yemen give it influence on Saudi Arabia’s southern border”.
- **Playing the spoiler** - “Iran has supported groups whose attacks [disrupt] Israeli- Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations. This is [viewed] as a victory for Iran, as it sees the negotiations as a betrayal of the Muslim cause and as a means of isolating the clerical regime in Iran”.
- **Intimidation** - “Working with terror groups gives Iran a subversive threat, allowing Iran to press its neighbours to distance themselves from the US or to refrain from joining economic or military efforts to [force] Iran”.
- **Deterrence** - Iran’s links to terrorist groups, especially Hezbollah with its “global infrastructure, [allow] it to threaten its enemies with terrorist retaliation. Therefore, giving Iran a [means] to respond to military or other pressure should it choose to do so.

In essence, the common claim from the West is that Iran provides funds, arms, training and intelligence to ‘terror groups’ such as Hamas and Hezbollah. It is however important to note that there are differences and complexities between the groups, which this paper will not address. Only, a brief explanation of these groups will be provided along with how Iran views these groups.

Hamas views itself as a Palestinian Sunni Islamist militant group fighting a “resistance” against the state of Israel and its occupation of Palestinian land (Team 2015). On the other hand, Hezbollah, originating from the advent of the civil war in Lebanon and the Iranian Revolution (1979) is a Lebanese Shi’ite Islamist political party and militant group, fighting against Israel and western occupation and influence within Lebanon (Shu 2015).



Importantly, Hezbollah is a close ally of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the group has been assisting the Syrian regime to survive.

In this regard, it can be argued that these groups have utilised terror tactics such as bombings, suicide bombers, hijackings and mutilations to achieve their goals. However, it becomes challenging to call these groups terrorists, as from an Iranian standpoint they are resistance movements fighting for their rights. Also, fighting Israel is a fundamental aspect of Iran's foreign policy. Importantly, the US is often quick to label countries as state sponsors of terrorism, while they are funding so called 'moderate' rebels in Syria and funded ISIS in the early stages of its development. They have also killed innocent civilians in Syria, Iraq and Libya and its allies in the Middle East such as Saudi-Arabia and Turkey are also known to be funding ISIS. In line with the US definition of terrorism could this not mean the 'great' superpower is also a sponsor of terrorism?

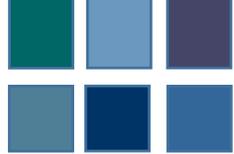
The US and Saudi-Arabia as funders of terrorism

The US is known to have a long and controversial history of backing terror groups. For instance, "during the 1970's the CIA used the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a barrier, both to thwart Soviet expansion and prevent the spread of Marxist ideology among the Arab masses". In addition, the US openly supported Sarekat Islam against Sukarno in Indonesia, and supported the Jamaat-e-Islami terror group against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan" (Chengu 2014).

Most importantly, there is Al Qaeda and ISIS which were created and are still funded by the US. Robin Cook, British Foreign Secretary told the House of Commons that the Al Qaeda was a "product of Western intelligence agencies" (Ebrahim 2017). However, depending on whether Al Qaeda furthers the US's interest or not, in a particular region, the US state department either funds or belligerently targets the group (Chengu 2014).

Saudi-Arabia, along with some of its neighbours punish Qatar for fostering and financing Islamist terrorism. However, some would argue that Saudi-Arabia – not Iran - is the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world today and "Wahhabism remains the source of most radical Islamic extremism" (Weinstein 2017). Regardless, Donald Trump still sides with Saudi-Arabia – even though the US has two essential bases in Qatar (New York Times Editorial Board 2017).

In this regard, it can be argued that the application of the term "terrorist" by the US is not related to what the term actually entails but it is rather used as a means to punish those who challenge the US and reward those who advance American interests and those of its allies (especially Israel). Hence, Iran is a major threat to US interests especially in the Middle East and thus is labelled the 'world's leading state-sponsor of terrorism'.



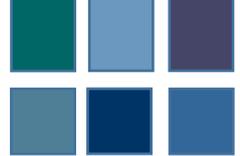
Conclusion

Terrorism remains a controversial and challenging term to address. There are a variety of perspectives based on a country's or individual's beliefs, values and interests.

According to different authors Iran does fund terrorism for ideological and strategic purposes. Although the groups Iran funds have committed violence, jeopardised human security and utilise terror tactics to pursue their goals, from an Iranian viewpoint the groups are not 'terrorists' but rather individuals fighting for their rights. Ultimately, claiming that Iran is the world's leading state-sponsor of terrorism is a contentious issue, especially given that there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes as terrorism or a terrorist group, and most importantly given that the US and its allies could also be seen as funders of terrorism. Given the above, one must thus ask who has the right to define terrorism and make such claims about a country?

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