



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TERROR GROUPS & ROGUE STATES

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Terror groups and rogue states all represent distinct threats to U.S. national security and the safety of our allies. Read on for an executive summary of The Policy Circle's deep dive into prominent terror groups and rogue states, their impacts locally and globally, and responses from the U.S.

Definitions

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines International Terrorism as “violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored).”

A rogue state is a term used to “designate regimes that employed terrorism as an instrument of state policy and attempted to acquire weapons of mass destruction in pursuit of policy goals.”

The U.S. Secretary of State designates Foreign Terrorist Organizations through the State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism's (CT) continual monitoring. When examining possible organizations, CT “looks not only at the actual terrorist attacks that a group has carried out, but also at whether the group has engaged in planning and preparations for possible future acts of terrorism or retains the capability and intent to carry out such acts.”

Criteria for Designation

- The organization must be a foreign organization;
- The organization must engage in terrorist activity, according to definitions set by the Immigration and Nationality Act, or retain the capability and intent to do so;
- The organization's terrorist activities must threaten the security of U.S. nationals or U.S. national security.

Legal Ramifications

- No U.S. persons can knowingly provide material, informative, or financial support or resources to designated groups;
- Representatives and members of designated groups, if they are aliens, are not allowed entry to the U.S. and, in some instances, are removable from the U.S.;
- Financial institutions that become aware of their possession of or control over funds tied to a designated group must report those funds to the U.S. Department of Treasury.

HAMAS

Hamas is a militant movement that also serves as one of the Palestinian territories' two major political parties. This entity is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group. In 2006, it won a majority of seats in the legislature and formed a government. It governs more than 2 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and "is best known for its armed resistance to Israel."

Supporters of Hamas

- Hamas is cut off from any aid from the United States and European Union due to its designation as a terrorist entity. Qatar is a strong financial supporter and foreign ally of Hamas. Qatar has reportedly transferred \$1.8 billion to support Hamas.
- Turkey, Qatar, and Iran are supportive of Hamas. Today, Iran is one of the largest supporters of Hamas and reportedly provides around \$100 million annually to Hamas and other Palestinian groups that the United States designates as terrorist organizations.

Areas of Operation

Hamas is organizationally split across four sectors: the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Palestinian diaspora, and Israeli prisons."

Key Beliefs/Ideology

- Hamas's original 1988 charter called for "the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic society in historic Palestine" in Israel's place.
- The group views all of the land of Mandate Palestine (with the exception of the land that became modern-day Jordan) "as an Islamic birthright that has been usurped." Hamas refuses to recognize the state of Israel and rejects peace talks and a two-state solution. In 2017, Hamas attempted to soften its image with a new document calling for "an interim Palestinian State," but still refuses to recognize Israel and reaffirms its dedication to "armed resistance."
- Hamas is "firmly in control of Gaza's government institutions and security services."

U.S. Strategy

- The U.S. designates Hamas as a terrorist organization and refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the Hamas government.
- Following the attacks in October of 2023, President Biden shared that "all appropriate means of support to the Government and people of Israel" will be offered.
- The U.S. Congress has already appropriated \$3.3 billion a year for Israel in Foreign Military Financing through FY 2028.

HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group that resists Israeli and Western involvement in the Middle East. Hezbollah, translating to “Party of God,” is an Iran-backed militant group.

The U.S. government and other countries have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist group. Following the developments of the October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, reports have emerged of Hezbollah’s involvement in the planning of the attack and direct involvement following firing across the Israeli border. Hezbollah described the deadly recent attack as a “decisive response to Israel’s continued occupation.”

Areas of Operation

- Hezbollah controls most of Lebanon’s Shiite-majority areas, which include parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the eastern Bekaa Valley region.
- The group has also been accused of committing acts of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, and there is evidence of Hezbollah operations in Africa, the Americas, and Asia.
- Hezbollah also has “its own camps to train members as well as members of other terrorist organizations.”

Key Beliefs/Ideology

- Hezbollah’s 1985 manifesto outlined the goals of seeking “to destroy Israel, to expel Western influences from Lebanon and the wider Middle East, and to combat its enemies within Lebanon... The group considered the international system and the 1985 Lebanese government subject to imperial influences and hostile to Islam, and it denied Israel’s right to exist...”
- A new manifesto in 2009 signaled a shift when Hezbollah transformed into a hybrid state actor and “began to consider the established Lebanese political system an appropriate channel through which to gain influence.”

Structure & Activities

- The Shura Council is the main organizational body of Hezbollah, with five sub-councils: the political assembly, the jihad assembly, the parliamentary assembly, the executive assembly, and the judicial assembly.
- All together, Hezbollah has strong military, political, and social branches and has been a part of the Lebanese government since 1992, when eight members were elected to Parliament.
- Animosity continues between Israel and Hezbollah, even after Israel officially withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah’s activity in Syria also poses concerns for U.S. interests in the region.
- Hezbollah reportedly “receives hundreds of millions of dollars from legal businesses, international criminal enterprises, and the Lebanese diaspora.”

HEZBOLLAH

Interaction with the Local Population

- Hezbollah is often called a “state within a state” because, in addition to its terrorist activities, it is also a political group providing social services to the Lebanese population.
- Social services Hezbollah provides include “infrastructure, health-care facilities, schools, and youth programs,” which have garnered support for Hezbollah among both Shiite and non-Shiite Lebanese.

U.S. Strategy

- U.S. strategy has often relied on targeting Hezbollah’s revenue streams. In 2015, Congress passed the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, “which sanctions foreign institutions that use U.S. bank accounts to finance Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. also co-lead the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, meant to “disrupt resource flows to Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah.”
- Following the October 2023 attacks, the U.S. government and senior level officials warned Hezbollah and other groups in the region, with senior U.S. defense officials sharing that they are “deeply concerned about Hezbollah making the wrong decision and choosing to open a second front to this conflict.”

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Known as Persia until 1935, Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the monarchy was overthrown and “[c]onservative clerical forces led by Ayatollah Khomeini established a theocratic system of government.” Iran has been designated a state sponsor of terrorism and remains subject to U.S., UN, and EU economic sanctions due to its “continued involvement in terrorism and concerns over possible military dimensions of its nuclear program.”

Key Beliefs/Ideology

- The aim of the Iranian Revolution “was to upend the reign of the shah and restore Islamic ideology to Iranian society. Under Khomeini, “the Iranian religious and political landscapes were dramatically transformed, making Shia Islam an inseparable element of the country’s political structure.”
- Iran supports the Assad regime in Syria; has reportedly provided support to Houthi insurgents fighting against the U.S.-supported Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; supports Hezbollah in Lebanon, and supports Shia militia groups against U.S.-backed Sunni and Kurdish groups in Iraq.

Interaction with the Local Population

- The Iranian regime is extremely repressive. Amnesty International deemed 2018 the “year of shame” after Iranian authorities arrested over “7,000 protesters, students, journalists, environmental activists, workers and human rights defenders, many arbitrarily.”
- Triggered by the death of Masha Amini in September 2022, “while in the custody of the Guidance Patrol (also known as the ‘morality police’) for allegedly violating the hijab dress code,” civilians erupted in protest against the Islamic Republic.
- While nationwide demonstrations quieted in 2023, the ACLED reported that between mid- September and December 2022, Iran experienced the highest number of violent protests since 2016.

U.S. Strategy

- The U.S. has not had diplomatic relations with Iran since the U.S. embassy in Tehran was seized in 1979, after which Iran “ground[ed] its identity and legitimacy in anti-Americanism.”
- In 2013, former Iranian President Rouhani and former President Obama held the first phone conversation between the two countries since 1979.
- They began discussions for the eventual JCPOA. The JCPOA was criticized for many reasons, and former President Trump officially withdrew U.S. participation in May 2018, “citing a lack of progress limiting Iran’s nuclear weapons development program and a failure to adequately deal with Iran’s missile program.”
- Since May 2019, U.S.-Iran tensions have been high: the Trump administration blacklisted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as “a foreign terrorist organization” in April 2019
- Regarding the impossibility of resurrecting the Iran Nuclear Deal, the Biden administration has pivoted its strategy dealing with a soon-to-be nuclear powerful Islamic Republic of Iran.
- Following the October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, and the potential involvement and support from Iran, the Biden Administration has shared that it is “reserving the option to halt Iran’s access to \$6 billion it is set to receive as part of a prisoner exchange deal.”

THE TALIBAN

The Taliban emerged in 1994 in the power vacuum left after the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan. “Disappointed that Islamic law had not been put in place following the ousting of communist rule,” leader Mullah Omar gathered a group of students and promised stability after years of conflict among mujahideen groups. Taliban means “students” in Pashto, and Pashtuns are the majority ethnic group in Afghanistan, particularly in the south and east and in Pakistan’s north and west.

Areas of Operation

- The Taliban operated in Afghanistan until 2001 when the U.S. invaded and helped overthrow the Taliban for harboring al-Qaeda. After 2001, it primarily operated from hideouts in Pakistan and in some border areas of Afghanistan.
- While the Taliban quickly defeated the last remains of resistance within a month of taking the capital city of Kabul on August 15, 2021, the National Resistance Front gained momentum by the Spring of 2022. Despite sending forces into districts known for resisting the Taliban's rule, the Taliban has been unsuccessful in eliminating Afghanistan resistance in 2023.

Key Beliefs/ Ideology

- According to Stanford University's Mapping Militant Organizations project, "the Taliban's main goal is to establish a Taliban-controlled government in Afghanistan."
- The ideology is seen as a shift away from traditional Islam towards a more "strict interpretation and enforcement of Sharia law." Osama bin Laden's jihadist and pan-Islamist views are also represented in Taliban governance.

Structure and Activities

- The Taliban earns revenue through criminal activities, including "opium poppy cultivation, drug trafficking, extortion of local businesses, and kidnapping," the UN monitoring group reports. Additionally, the Taliban levies taxes on commercial activities in the territories it controls and collects customs revenue at border crossings. Annual income estimates vary widely but range as high as \$1.6 billion.

U.S Strategy

- Although the UN Security Council reported the Taliban "shows no sign of reducing the level of violence in Afghanistan to facilitate peace negotiations," the U.S. began to withdraw troops in May 2021.
- By August 11, 2021, 95% of U.S. troops had been withdrawn, and the Taliban took complete control of Kabul on August 16. There were multiple reports that the Taliban had seized an array of American military equipment – including guns, ammunition, and combat aircraft – after overrunning Afghan forces.
- While no country has officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government in Afghanistan, China and Russia have recently expressed interest in a relationship with the Taliban.

AL QAEDA & AFFILIATES

Al-Qaeda first gained mainstream attention in the U.S. with its 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. On October 12, 2000, suicide bombers linked to al-Qaeda attacked the destroyer USS Cole as it was refueling in the Yemeni port of Aden, killing 17 American sailors and injuring 39. Osama bin Laden publicly took credit for the attack.

Since al-Qaeda's September 11th, 2001 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the group has been considered one of the greatest threats to American security and values.

Areas of Operation

- Al-Qaeda originated in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and its leadership is still largely based there. The group may have underground cells in dozens of countries and its main areas of activity include the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, East Africa, North and West Africa, and Central, South, and South-East Asia.

Key Beliefs & Ideology

- Al-Qaeda aims to “unify the umma, Muslim community” and eventually build a caliphate, a political and religious Islamic state ruled by a caliph or chief Muslim ruler.

Structure & Activities

- In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001 and during the war in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's core leadership fled to Pakistan and regrouped in tribal areas along the Afghan border.
- The group and its affiliates have a history of financing their terrorism with a variety of illegal activities, including ordinary crime and drug trafficking, as well as kidnapping and holding Western civilians for ransom.

U.S. Strategy

- In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the U.S. “relentlessly pursued Al Qaeda, targeting its leadership, disrupting its finances, destroying its training camps, infiltrating its communications networks, and ultimately crippling its ability to function.” The death of Osama Bin Laden also further diminished al-Qaeda's influence.
- U.S. counterterrorism measures overall have succeeded in preventing another event like 9/11, but the challenge going forward will be balancing a number of competing national security challenges and diminished fiscal resources.

ISLAMIC STATE (ISIS)

Known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), ISIL stands for the Arabic acronym “Daesh” or “Da’ish.” The Islamic State started as an al-Qaeda splinter group. It is a militant Sunni movement that aims to create a caliphate across Iraq, Syria and beyond. The group implements Sharia Law, rooted in eighth century Islam.

Areas of Operation

- ISIS’ main operations were in Syria and Iraq, but it has sympathizers around the world.
- In 2011, the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq created a power vacuum, which ISIS filled.

Key Beliefs & Ideology

- Ideologically, ISIS “identifies with a movement in Islamic political thought known as Jihadi-Salafism, or jihadism for short,” according to scholar Cole Bunzel.
- The jihadi strain “emerged in response to the rise of Western imperialism and the associated decline of Islam in public life.”

Structure & Activities

- ISIS’s leader was “the self-proclaimed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” who spent time in U.S.-run prisons in Iraq, where cells were organized.
- He died in a U.S. special operation in late October 2019.
- The U.S. Treasury Department described ISIS as “probably the best-funded terrorist organization we have confronted.”

U.S. Strategy

- In 2014, the U.S. Department of State announced the formation of a broad international coalition of 74 countries to provide military support, stop ISIS’s finances, and address the humanitarian crisis.
- Although U.S. troops under the Biden Administration remain diligent in combating ISIS in Syria, the terror group gained ground in central and southern Syria, where President Bashar-al-Assad’s regime remains in control.
- Given the ground ISIS gained during 2020, many U.S. military analysts believe ISIS poses a direct threat to regional governments and are concerned that further reducing U.S. troops in the region will “hinder the ability of the United States to maintain pressure against the group.”