

Who are today's terrorists?

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Maryam Rajavi, leader of the U.S. designated terrorist organization Mujahadin-e Khalq Organization, is seen by the group's members as the Iranian president in exile. She is shown in this file photo taken June 2006. (UPI)

Of the 42 groups designated by the U.S. State Department as "foreign terrorist organizations" in its 2007 Country Report on Terrorists, 22 – half of the organizations – hail from the Middle East and North Africa; more if one includes the so-called Greater Middle East. And this is not a complete list by any means.

Indeed, in the U.S. government's latest release the Greater Middle East is home base to 28 terrorist groups, or at least organizations considered to be terrorist groups by the United States. That list includes groups seen as legitimate parties in their home countries, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Asia and Europe are home to five terrorist groups each, and South America to four.

Here's how they breakdown with a brief description of some of the main groups:

Pan-Islamic (1 group):

- Al-Qaida

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network remains at the top of the list as the group representing "the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and its partners in 2007." Despite a number of setbacks suffered by the organization in 2007, al-Qaida has managed to make headway in other parts of the world, particularly in Africa, affiliating itself with regional Islamist insurgent groups, as was the case in Morocco and Algeria.

THE BIG FEAR:

Foremost in the minds of those fighting terrorism is the perpetual fear that eventually one of these groups will succeed in acquiring a weapon of mass destruction. As stated in the report issued by the Department of State, there are four categories of weapons of mass destruction that terrorists may seek to use: nuclear, radiological, biological, and chemical.

Al-Qaida has made no secret of its intention to acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons. When U.S. forces entered abandoned al-Qaida camps in Afghanistan they found evidence that the organization was experimenting with chemical agents, testing them on animals.

Far easier to construct than a nuclear weapon is a "dirty bomb." This consists of wrapping radioactive elements around a conventional bomb, exposing a large area to radioactivity and shutting down home activity in that sector for possibly decades.

Palestine (6 groups):

- Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade
- Hamas
- Palestine Liberation Front (PLF)
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
- Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

- Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC)

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade consists of loose cells of possibly about 200 Palestinian militants loyal to, but not under the direct control of, the secular-nationalist Fatah movement. Al-Aqsa emerged at the outset of the 2000 Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada as a militant offshoot of the Fatah party to attack Israeli military targets and settlers with the aim of driving Israel from the West Bank and Gaza and establishing a Palestinian state. Al-Aqsa has no central leadership; the cells operate with autonomy, although they remained ideologically loyal to Palestinian Authority (PA) President and Fatah party head Yasser Arafat until his death in November 2004.

The Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, which includes military and political wings, was formed at the onset of the first Palestinian uprising or intifada in late 1987. It is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its forces are estimated to number several hundred operatives, plus 9,000 in its Executive Force and tens of thousands of supporters and sympathizers. Hamas has carried out suicide bombings against civilian targets inside Israel through its armed wing known as the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Hamas, who ousted the PA in Gaza in June 2007, runs social networks that include charities, schools, clinics, youth camps, fund-raising, and political activities. Iran supplies much of the group's funding, weapons, and training.

The "traditional" Palestinian groups, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC); the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) formerly led by Abu Abbas – who died in U.S. custody in Iraq in 2004 – has lost much of their following to Hamas. Abbas's group commandeered the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro in 1985 and killed Leon Klinghoffer. They officially renounced terrorism in 1993 when they acknowledged the Oslo accords.

Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) formed by militant Palestinians in Gaza during the 1970s, is committed to both the creation of an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine, including present day Israel, and the destruction of Israel through attacks against Israeli military and civilian targets.

Lebanon (3 groups):

- Abu Nidal Organization (ANO)
- Asbat al-Ansar
- Hezbollah

Abu Nidal Organization was founded by Sabri al-Banna (a.k.a. Abu Nidal) after splitting from the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1974. Dormant since the late 1980s, it is believed to have carried out attacks in 20 countries, killing or injuring almost 900 persons. Major attacks included the Rome and Vienna airports in 1985, the Neve Shalom synagogue in Istanbul, the hijacking of Pan Am Flight 73 in Karachi in 1986, and the City of Poros day-excursion ship attack in Greece in 1988. The ANO is suspected of assassinating PLO deputy chief Abu Iyad and PLO security Chief Abu Hul in Tunis in 1991. Abu Nidal died in Baghdad in August 2002, probably at the hands of Iraqi security officials.

Hezbollah means the Party of God. It was created in 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It is largely backed by Syria and Iran and though considered a terrorist group by the United States, Hezbollah is viewed as a legitimate resistance force and political party. They have 14 elected officials in the 128-seat Lebanese parliament and were represented in the cabinet for the first time, by the Minister of Water and Electricity Muhammad Fneish, until his resignation, along with other Shiite ministers in November 2006.

Iraq (3 groups):

- Ansar al-Sunnah
- Kongra-Gel (formerly PKK)/People's Defense Force
- Al-Qaida in Iraq

Egypt (2 groups):

- Gama'a al-Islamiyya (IG)
- Al-Jihad (AJ)

Gama'a al-Islamiyya (IG), Egypt's largest militant group, has been active since the late 1970s, but is now a loosely organized network. The external wing, composed of mainly exiled members in several countries, maintains that its primary goal is to overthrow the Egyptian government and replace it with an Islamic state.

Al-Jihad, an extremist Egyptian Islamic group merged with al-Qaida. Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was the former head of AJ. Active since the 1970s, AJ's primary goal has been the overthrow of the Egyptian government and the establishment of an Islamic state.

Israel (operating in Palestinian territories) (1 group):

- Kahane Chai (Kach)

Kahane Chai's (Kach) goal was to restore the biblical state of Israel. The group disbanded in 2005. Kach was founded by radical Israeli-American rabbi Meir Kahane. Its offshoot, Kahane Chai, (translation: "Kahane Lives") was founded by Meir Kahane's son Binyamin following his father's 1990 assassination in the United States. Both Kach and Kahane Chai were declared terrorist organizations in 1994 by the Israeli cabinet under its 1948 Terrorism Law.

Iran (1 group):

- Mujahadin-e Khalq Organization (MEK)

The Mujahadin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) advocates the violent overthrow of the Iranian regime and was responsible for the assassination of several U.S. military personnel and civilians in the 1970s. The MEK's armed wing is known as the National Liberation Army of Iran (NLA). In December 2006, the European Court of Justice ruled to overturn the designation of the MEK as a terrorist organization but was not supported by the Council of the European Union (EU). According to the State Department, upon entry into the group, new members are indoctrinated in MEK ideology and revisionist Iranian history. Members are also required to undertake a vow of "eternal divorce" and participate in weekly "ideological cleansings." Additionally, children are reportedly separated from parents at a young age. MEK leader Maryam Rajavi has established a "cult of personality." She claims to emulate the Prophet Muhammad and is viewed by members as the "Iranian president in exile."

Morocco (2 groups):

- Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM)
- Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

Libya (1 group):

- Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)

Algeria (1 group):

- Armed Islamic Group

The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) aims to overthrow the Algerian regime and replace it with a state governed by Sharia law. The GIA began its violent activity in 1992 after the military government suspended legislative elections in anticipation of an overwhelming victory by the Islamic Salvation Front, the largest Algerian Islamic opposition party.

Turkey (1 group):

- Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP/C)

Pakistan (4 groups):

- Harakat ul-Mujahadin (HUM)
- Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM)
- Lashkar e-Tayyiba
- Lashkar i Jhangvi (LJ)

Uzbekistan (2 groups):

- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)
- Islamic Jihad Group (IJG)

Philippines (2 groups):

- Abu Sayyaf Group
- Communist Party of Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA)

Abu Sayyaf Group, a.k.a. al-Harakat al-Islamiyya, is described in the State Department's report as "an Islamic terrorist group operating in the southern Philippines." The group's stated goal is to promote an independent Islamic state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago, areas in the southern Philippines heavily populated by Muslims.

Indonesia/Philippines/Malaysia (1 group):

- Jemaah Islamiya Organization (JI)

Japan (1 group):

- Aum Shinrikyo

Sri Lanka (1 group):

- Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

Ireland (2 groups):

- Real IRA (RIRA)
- Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA)

Greece (2 groups):

- Revolutionary Nuclei (RN)
- Revolutionary Organization 17 November (17N)

Spain (1 group):

- Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)

Colombia (3 groups):

- National Liberation Army (ELN)
- Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)
- United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)

Peru (1 group):

- Shining Path (SL)