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Iran's revolutionary Unit as a terrorist entity

Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the US intention to declare it as a specially designated global terrorist organization: the end of the distinction between sub-national groups and a terrorist state?

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The President of the United States, G.W. Bush, has announced that his administration intends to declare the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist Organization", the Washington Post stated in August 2007.

The average newspaper reader would not have paid any extra attention to this development. However, the declaration left academic terrorism researchers perplexed, if not astonished.

In order to clarify this vital issue, it is important to shed light on the question of who is identified as a terrorist, or which politically-motivated group is identified as a terrorist group.

One important aspect of who should be termed a terrorist is the distinction between a violent act conducted by a state or its official army and a violent act derived from politically motivated ideology, which is aimed against civilians and conducted by individuals or sub-national groups.

The United States' State Department uses the term 'terrorism' following Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d):

'Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience' 2.

This definition makes a clear distinction between a violent act against civilians (otherwise it would be labeled as 'guerrilla warfare'), which is conducted directly by an official authority such as the leadership of a state, and between an act conducted by sub-national groups or organizations.

However, the example of Iranian/Libyan terrorists blowing up Pan-Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland enforces the understanding that although terrorism is conducted by sub-national groups, it may be backed by a national government.

On the other hand, any violent action against civilian infrastructure directly and officially conducted by a sovereign state's uniformed army is not defined as terrorist action and it does not matter whether other elements are involved.



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This point was reinforced after by two Chinese fighters accidentally downed the accidental the British-owned Skymaster aircraft of Cathay Pacific Airways (23 June 1954) flying from Bangkok to Hong-Kong, causing the deaths of ten passengers onboard. Another case in point is the downing of the Israeli El-Al aircraft (27 July 1955) flying near the Greek-Bulgarian frontier by Bulgarian fighters, causing the death of all fifty eight passengers and crew onboard.

All these incidents are not classified as acts of terrorism. However, had the action been conducted by a sub-state group or by clandestine agents, it would have been categorized as terrorist action. This was the case when the United Kingdom decided to break off diplomatic relations with Syria after a Syrian leader was implicated in a plot to blow up an El-Al airliner in April 1986 ('The Nezar Hindawi' case).

This decision, - which was followed by other western countries - as well as the implementation of sanctions against Syria by the US, emphasizes the understanding that terrorism is not unique to sub-state groups. However, it may be state-sponsored. In such cases, supporting terrorism - by financing it, by providing logistical support or by hosting terrorist groups - does not reduce the responsibility of a national government. Yet, the state is not identified as 'terrorist'; it may, however, be called a 'terror sponsor', as identified by the US State Department's list, first formed in 1979 3.

This issue may open a new debate, with reference to some actions conducted by sovereign governments, such as the bombing of Dresden, Coventry, London and Hiroshima. These actions were deliberately aimed against non-combatants and unarmed people, a fact that raises the question as to whether these aforementioned incidents are considered 'acts of terrorism'. It may be assumed that the brutal acts conducted by Pol Pot during the 1970s in Cambodia (and against his own people) are considered 'terrorism', according to Paul Wilkinson's definition of terrorism: 'Terrorism is the systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to service political ends'⁴.

Still, actions conducted by officials or established military personnel, or actions conducted by a sovereign regime as an official policy, cannot be identified as terrorism, if one accepts the US State Department's definition, emphasizing the action as conducted by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, but can rather be labeled as 'genocide' or crimes against humanity.



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This was the case of Slobodan Milosevic who was accused of crimes against humanity and genocide by the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. However, Milosevic died in custody in March 2006 before he was sentenced.

Hence, violent actions motivated by a political ideology are defined, in this case, not by the type of action but rather by the one who conducts it. The US State Department's definition emphasizes the role of sub-national groups (or even individuals).

The vital distinction between a violent act conducted by individuals or a sub-national group, and a violent act conducted by an official regime, was an understanding that actually offered some kind of 'immunity' to nations when their army had conducted violent acts deliberately aimed against civilian infrastructure during undeclared war.

According to this understanding, the downing of the Iran-Air Airbus A-300 jet (flight 655) -by the American navy on 3 July 1988 over the Persian Gulf by the USS Vincennes, which caused the death of all 274 passengers and crew on board - is not considered a terrorist act. The jet was wrongly identified as a threatening target and was subsequently shot down by surface-to-air-missiles. It isn't considered an act of terrorism, not only because of the wrong identification which may emphasize that the deliberate motive did not play a role - another element which is necessary in order to declare the act as terrorism-, but mainly due to the fact that the act was carried out by an official army.

The US intention to declare Iran's Revolutionary Guard as a specially designated global terrorist organization will certainly affect the Guard, but may also cause an upheaval: the revolution of the traditional understanding of who is a terrorist.

Were this intention to become an official statement, it would enable the US administration to launch wide economic sanctions against the Iranian leadership. Furthermore, America's decision would have far-reaching consequences, since the traditional definition of terrorism, as emphasized by the US State Department, would have to be updated as to enable any future attack against civilians conducted by the official army of a sovereign state to be defined as a terrorist act - with all its implications.



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It is well known that states have been involved in violent action against civilians all over the world. The clear separation between an act conducted by a state as an official policy, and an act conducted by sub-national organizations, would become irrelevant, as would the US term 'state sponsor of terrorism'. Additionally, this issue may affect states which are in constant confrontation with terrorists.

Should the Bush administration carry out its intention of declaring Iran's Revolutionary Guard a terrorist group, how would Israel defend a violent attack against a Lebanese airport or Arab airlines, as occurred on 28 December 1968?

Therefore, the US intention should be carefully examined and considered, weighing, not only its economic implications or America's interests, but also academic and historical aspects.

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