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How Terror Groups End

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This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center's Division of International Security Studies, the RAND Corporation, and the U.S. Army's Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

While a rich literature exists on the causes of terrorism and the origins of terrorist groups, scant attention has focused on the critical question – how terror groups end. The issue is particularly timely and important given that the United States is now in the fifth year of what the White House calls the “Global War on Terrorism.” Senior U.S. officials have recently spoken of this ongoing struggle, which began after the September 11th terrorist attacks by al Qaeda, as “the Long War.”

According to Dr. Harmon, the historical record indicates that terror groups *do* eventually come to an end. An encyclopedia of terror groups from the 1970s and 1980s yields dozens of groups – ranging from the Breton Liberation Front in France to the Liberation Front of Quebec – that no longer exist.

Harmon identified five different routes that have led to the end of terror groups.

- (1) Military force – In response to 9/11, this option was employed by the United States against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The autumn 2001 conflict to topple the Taliban regime was a war of necessity to block al Qaeda from using that country as a base to conduct overseas terrorist operations.
- (2) Capturing or killing the terrorist groups leaders – A notable example of this route to ending terror groups was the PKK, or Kurdish Workers Party. The PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was responsible for terrorist attacks in Turkey and Germany from the mid-1970s. His capture in 1999 led to the collapse of his organization.
- (3) A turn toward democracy – Some terrorist groups do turn away from violence and reintegrate into society. Colombia's M-19, a Castroite organization that engaged in narco-terrorism, became a legal party after reaching peace agreement with the government.

- (4) Good grand strategy – Effective leadership employing the full range of national power (from political and military through economic and informational) has led to the demise of terror groups. For example, the German government's focused effort and discipline wore out the Red Army Faction (aka the Baader-Meinhof group) in the late 1970s. The Germans employed new methods of policing, including an early form of data-mining and a new counter-terrorism unit (created after the 1972 Olympics attack by Palestinian radicals), to bring down the group.
- (5) Some terrorists succeed – Harmon cited Algeria's FLN (or National Liberation Front) as an example of a group that employed terrorism as part of their guerrilla war to shed French colonial rule. The FLN pioneered the use of plastique bombings in cities and came to power in 1962 as a single-party state.

Harmon likened the current transnational threat posed by al Qaeda to that of Marxist groups in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. One lesson from that earlier period is that effective strategies on the state level are essential for denying non-state terrorist groups the ability to operate and for keeping them on the run.

Robert Litwak, Ph.D., Director, Division of International Security Studies