

Chapter 20: Culture and Community in the Global Age: 20-3b Terrorism  
Book Title: The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History 7th Edition Update, AP® Edition  
Printed By: James Harper (carter\_mcquaid@roundrockisd.org)  
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## 20-3b Terrorism

Terrorism is a political tactic by which comparatively weak militants use grotesquely inhumane and lethal acts to convince a frightened public that danger is everywhere and their government is incapable of protecting them. Although terrorism has a long history, the instantaneous media links made possible by satellite communications, and the journalistic tradition treating violence as headline news, increased its effectiveness from the 1980s onward.

Bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations made political sense to all sorts of political groups: secular Palestinians confronting Israel; national separatists like the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Basques in Spain, and Chechens in Russia; and Catholic and Protestant extremists in Northern Ireland, to name a few. But Muslim groups gained the lion's share of attention when they targeted the United States and Europe, recruited from Muslim populations all over the world, and made effective use of news coverage and audiovisual communications.

The political rationale put forward by al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan, justified *jihad*, or holy war, as a defensive struggle against the United States and the former colonial powers in Europe, the “far enemy,” which were seen as essential supports for Muslim monarchies, like Saudi Arabia, and

military regimes, like Egypt and Syria, that oppressed their own citizens. If these outsiders were forced to withdraw from the Muslim world, therefore, the oppressive regimes would collapse. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 seemed to support this theory. Between 1989 and 2001, when the United States attacked that country in reaction to 9/11, the Afghans sought to govern their own affairs. These efforts led to the rise of an oppressive religious regime known as the Taliban, but the violence of Taliban rule, under whose protective umbrella al-Qaeda took shape, was little worse than that under the earlier Soviet occupation or later American control.

### AP® Exam Tip

Explain how some movements (such as al-Qaeda) used violence against civilians to achieve political aims.

Al-Qaeda's media star and ideological spokesman was [Osama bin Laden \(Saudi-born Muslim extremist who funded the al-Qaeda organization that was responsible for several terrorist attacks, including those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. \(p. 599\)\)](#). Born into a wealthy Saudi family and educated as an engineer, bin Laden fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and there recruited and trained a core group of al-Qaeda fighters. Al-Qaeda blew up American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, crippled the U.S. Navy destroyer *Cole* during a port call in Yemen in 2000, and then capped

everything by the attacks of 9/11. When the “global war on terrorism” declared by President Bush failed to eliminate bin Laden, his mystique grew. Further terrorist attacks—by Indonesians on tourists on the island of Bali in 2002, by North Africans on commuter trains servicing Madrid in 2004, by English-born Muslims on the London transit system in 2005, and by Pakistanis on luxury hotels in Mumbai, India, in 2008—made it clear that the current of violence unleashed by al-Qaeda had become decentralized and that recruits and cells might no longer be taking orders exclusively from bin Laden. Even after an American commando operation killed bin Laden in his hideout in Pakistan in 2011, affiliates like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Boko Haram continued to operate in Yemen, North Africa (the Maghreb), and West Africa, respectively.

In 2013 an offshoot of al-Qaeda known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) proclaimed independence from al-Qaeda and announced that a shadowy figure named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would henceforth be the *Caliph* (absolute religious ruler) of an Islamic State that would seek the allegiance of Muslims anywhere in the world. Departing from al-Qaeda’s justifications of violence based on the far enemy theory, ISIS maintained that it was recreating the original Islamic state of the seventh century and publicized atrocities—including beheadings of captives and wanton destruction of pre-Islamic historical monuments—that horrified the world. Spectacular attacks on civilians in Paris and Brussels in 2016 vaulted ISIS ahead of al-Qaeda as the most alarming perpetrator of violence in the name of Islam. They also demonstrated that flagrant criminality and vigorous recruitment through the use of social media could be successful in attracting fighters even as they outraged world opinion.

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