Terrorism: The Problems of Definition

Version Francais

Defining terrorism has become so polemical and subjective an undertaking as to resemble an art rather than a science. Texts on the subject proliferate and no standard work on terrorism can be considered complete without at least an introductory chapter being devoted to this issue.[1] Media coverage of terrorist incidents over the years has further confounded the difficulties of defining terrorism, which is variously described as the work of, among others, 'commandos,' ‘extremists,’ fundamentalists,’ and ‘guerillas.’ As David Rapport cautioned of this phenomenon almost three decades ago; “In attempting to correct the abuse of language for political purposes our journalists may succeed in making language altogether useless.”[2] The negative connotations associated with the word ‘terrorism’ have further complicated attempts to arrive at an objective definition of the term.

Some experts on terrorism are skeptical as to whether the seemingly interminable attempts to define terrorism are capable of bearing fruit. As, one, Walter Laqueur, opines: “Even if there were an objective, value-free definition of terrorism, covering all its important aspects and features, it would still be rejected by some for ideological reasons […]”[3] This assertion will probably remain true. However, if such a definition is a destination, the journey towards it can almost be an end in itself. Arriving at a working definition also has uses other than increasing our understanding of terrorism. For by defining terrorism one can also define the preferred means of countering it. Defining terrorism also allows terrorists to be defined (or not), justifying (or not) any action that is being taken against them.

U.S. Definitions of Terrorism

Often, a uniform definition of terrorism will not even exist across the various concerned agencies of a given country. Such is the case with the United States, where the range of definitions listed below is currently applied.[4]

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<th>Agency</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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[1] Refer to the source for the original text.
Table 1: Definitions of Terrorism Adopted by Various U.S. Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
<td>The calculated use of unlawful violence to inculcate fear, intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological. [5]</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>[T]he unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives. [6]</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Department</td>
<td>[P]remeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience. [7]</td>
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Such definitions are made more equivocal by the rhetoric surrounding the so-called ‘Global War on Terrorism,’ as the current American administration describes the series of military campaigns and other initiatives that were provoked by the al Qaeda attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. As with the journalistic tendencies referred to above, such a broad reading of ‘terrorism’ as this usage engenders risk rendering the term meaningless. It also lays the government open to charges that it is undermining its own counterterrorism efforts through the use of such wide terminology in compiling the statistics attached to them. [8]

All the American definitions above feature some element of the three inter-related factors that most attempts to arrive at a workable definition of terrorism have tended to revolve around; namely, the terrorists’ (or persons being termed terrorists) motives, identity and methods.

**Ends**

War, according to the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum, is “the continuation of political intercourse with the addition of other means.” [9] Much the same has been said of terrorism, a violent phenomenon often seen as distinguished partly by its practitioners’ political motivations. This view of terrorism as political violence possibly stems from its roots as a political term applied to the French Revolutionary tribunals active during that country’s ‘Reign of Terror,’ with terrorism’s political connotations continuing to feature throughout much of its historical development. [10] As one long-time scholar of the phenomenon puts it: “Terrorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political.” [11] However, as with many definitional characteristics of terrorism, this view of it as always being political is not universally accepted. Nor is motivation always considered a factor in deciding what is and is not terrorism.

This was the position of the late Eqbal Ahmad, who argued that motivations “make no difference.” [12] Jessica Stern agrees, seeing any definition of terrorism as being...
unlimited by either “perpetrator or purpose.” This approach, while not excluding political goals as a terrorist aim, also allows for other motivations, such as the purely criminal, or even religious. To Stern it is the “deliberate evocation of dread is what sets terrorism apart from simple murder or assault.” [13] Such a reading underlay the recent judicial ruling that the chief suspect in the rash of ‘sniper’ murders that occurred in the Washington, D.C., area last year could be charged under Virginia’s new post-Sept. 11, 2001 anti-terrorism law.

The question over whether the snipers should be classified as terrorists, although they clearly did ‘terrorize’ the D.C. metropolitan area for a time, highlights the dilemma of broadening the definition of terrorism to include violence that is not primarily political in intent. Such a widening has drawbacks. As a brief survey by one scholar shows, by the 1990s, the word terrorism had been applied to issues as diverse as: Apartheid; ‘consumer terrorism’ (the poisoning of food products in supermarkets by criminal extortionists); ‘economic terrorism’ (i.e. ‘aggressive’ currency speculation); ‘narco-terrorism’; obscene phone calls; pornography; rape; and, state terrorism.[14] Such a broad interpretation of terrorism risks making the term so elastic as to deprive it of its meaning.

In addition, the assumption that the psychological effect of terrorism is uppermost in terrorists’ minds when they act is also debatable. Often, despite its name, the primary intent of terrorism appears to be to kill rather than frighten. This has been contended to have been the case with the 1998 bombing of an airliner over Lockerbie, with Libyan involvement most likely retaliation for the bombing of that country by the United States in 1986.[15] Certainly, revenge seems to have at least partly provoked the periodic rounds of ‘tit for tat’ killing that characterized much of Northern Ireland’s ‘troubles.’ (although, here, as with Lockerbie, political considerations also played a role, with such killings seeking to consolidate loyalist and republican terrorists’ self-proclaimed role as protectors of their respective communities). The Sept. 11 attacks on the United States also appear to have been at least partly motivated by revenge (for what the perpetrators viewed as American actions against Muslims), a desire to kill large numbers of people, and the political aspirations of al Qaeda.

Political motivation is persuasively argued by Paul R. Pillar to be a prerequisite of terrorism, although he concedes that criminal activity is not only often undertaken by terrorists, but can often have political repercussions of its own. As Pillar states:

> Terrorism is fundamentally different from these other forms of violence, however, in what gives rise to it and in how it must be countered, beyond simple physical security and police techniques. Terrorists’ concerns are macroconcerns about changing a larger order; other violent criminals are focused on the microlevel of pecuniary gain and personal relationships. ‘Political’ in this regard encompasses not just traditional left-right politics but also what are frequently described as religious motivations or social issues.[16]

While terrorism can be identified as political violence, it is far from the case that all political violence can therefore be regarded as terrorism. War, for instance, is a form of political violence, but one which is, generally speaking, differentiated from terrorist action. This trend is partly connected to the tendency to label certain acts of political violence terrorism on the basis of their perpetrator’s identity.

Identification
The connection between terrorism and political goals is related to the perceived illegitimacy of political violence – especially in the West. This in turn reflects the legitimacy of the liberal democratic state as perceived by other liberal democracies. In such states, democracy is considered to provide an alternative to violence as an agent of political change, with the state viewed as sole custodian of the monopoly of legitimate force. Political violence against the state is therefore more apt to be termed ‘terrorism’ with all the negative connotations the term denotes – than is political violence on the part of the state.

This is not universally accepted to be the case however. Some commentators see terrorism as a tool of states also, viewing, for instance, the allied strategic bombing campaigns during World War II, and the dropping of two atomic bombs by the United States against Japan during the same conflict, as examples of state terrorism. The oppressive measures imposed by totalitarian regimes such as those which once existed in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia, as well as, more recently, the military dictatorships which have previously ruled some South American countries, could also been debated to use terrorism. So, too, could some of today’s governments such as that in Zimbabwe, or until very recently, the Baathist regime in Iraq. In addition, state-sponsored terrorism has been practiced by countries like Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and North Korea – the latter further muddying the definitional waters by themselves directly participating in covert acts which could be described as terrorism, such as the kidnapping of Japanese citizens.

Despite such considerations, some, such as Bruce Hoffman, contend that “such usages are generally termed ‘terror’ in order to distinguish that phenomenon from ‘terrorism,’ which is understood to be violence committed by non-state entities.” Such a state-centric reading is Western in outlook, and would probably be questioned by those non-state actors who regard themselves as politically disenfranchised. Moreover, while the application of the term ‘terrorism’ may bestow illegitimacy on those it is applied to (or their cause), it can likewise confer legitimacy on the governments combating it and their methods. Sympathy for a cause or disapproval for the regime or methods used to counter it can therefore lead to inconsistency in deciding what is and is not terrorism.

As a consequence of such reasoning, what might be viewed as terrorism by the West (if it occurs in a ‘Westernized’ or liberal democratic state) may be regarded differently when it happens in less ‘legitimate’ states, such as are often regarded by the First World to exist in less politically stable regions of the world. As Adrian Guelke states, “any doubts about the regime’s legitimacy naturally tend to be reinforced by signs of political instability, including violence.” An increase in violence (as Guelke further notes) makes the Western media less inclined to term it terrorism – a trend possibly reinforced by the lessened pressure they feel to condemn political violence which occurs outside the West. As this indicates, terrorism resides in the eye of the beholder. Or, as one much-quoted and overly-trite truism has it: “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”

Similarly debatable is the assertion that; “To qualify as terrorism, violence must be perpetrated by some organizational entity with at least some conspiratorial structure and identifiable chain of command beyond a single individual acting on his or her own.” Arguably, a lone operator, if politically motivated (rather than pursuing economic or egotistical ends as is the case with his criminal or mentally unbalanced counterparts) and using the methods of terrorists, should also be called a terrorist. Unless such an approach is adopted the politically motivated acts of individuals such as Mir Aimal Kansi (who killed two CIA employees outside the organization’s headquarters in 1993) and Sirhan Sirhan (who assassinated Sen. Robert Kennedy in 1968) would be classed as criminal rather than terrorist.
If observers are often divided as to who is and is not a terrorist, this is less true of terrorists themselves, who uniformly oppose being described thus. Indeed it has been some 60 years since a terrorist organization — the Jewish group known as the Stern Gang (after its founder Abraham Stern) — publicly described itself thus. Not even the Sternists officially labeled their group terrorist, instead opting to call themselves the Lohamei Hermut Yisrael (or Fighters for Israel).[22] This reluctance to accept the moniker ‘terrorist’ is reflected not only in the proclamations of many groups but in their adoption of neutral-sounding names for themselves, or ones which often invoke their purported causes – such as freedom, liberation, justice, revenge, resistance or self-defense.[23]

This contrasts sharply with the attitude displayed by the such groups’ victims, who are more inclined to call their attackers ‘terrorists’ – further demonstrating the term’s negative connotations. These connotations, along with the other factors mentioned above, make any attempt to define terrorism based on the identity of its perpetrators so subjective as to be unusable. Attempts to carry out such an identification based on the status of the terrorist’s victims (i.e. whether they are non-combatants or not) do offer a more useful basis for definition, however, this is only true insofar as a consensus can be arrived at as to what constitutes a non-combatant. For instance, should members of a state’s security forces be considered legitimate targets even if they are off duty or not in a position to defend themselves?[24] This latter consideration particularly encroaches on the third factor that is often considered in defining terrorism – namely the means employed by the terrorist.

### Means

Terrorists tend to justify their methods by insisting these are forced upon them due to a lack of resources, and renounce attempts to describe their actions as terrorism. Often, as is the case with the names adopted by such groups, the assertion is made that, rather than terrorists, they are fighters or soldiers in a cause, albeit ones forced by circumstances to use differing strategies, tactics, and methods from better-equipped national armies. This insistence (which ignores the benefits attached to terrorist methods – unless these are viewed as serendipitous side-effects) extends to terrorists demanding that they be treated as prisoners of war and not criminals. The conviction with which this assertion is often held was demonstrated by Provisional Irish Republican Army prisoners in the 1980s when 10 of them died on hunger strikes in protest at the U.K. government’s decision to end their ‘special category status’ – a move which meant they would now be regarded at criminals rather than the prisoners of war they wished to be regarded as.

However, war is regulated by a series of laws (in theory if not always in fact) that prohibit certain weapons and tactics as well as precluding attacks on certain categories of targets (most notably non-combatants) and placing restrictions on the treatment of prisoners. The terrorist often ignores such laws as are codified in the Geneva Conventions, targeting non-combatants, operating in civilian clothes, and taking (and often mistreating or killing) hostages. From that point of view, anyone using such tactics is waging terrorism rather than war. One UN report on the topic takes this further, suggesting that a simplified definition of acts of terrorism could see these as the “peacetime equivalents of war crimes.”[25] Such an approach not only offers a way of identifying terrorists via their methods, but provides a framework for punitive action against those found guilty of terrorism, offering a potential solution to the controversy this often entails – as evidenced by the current controversy over the status of the suspected terrorists currently being held by the U.S. authorities at Guantanamo Bay.

An emphasis on method over purported aims also tends to make terrorist acts appear...
less legitimate. In the words of one analyst: “Categories of ends, such as revolution, coup d’état, and counter-insurgency, are far less emotive or derogatory than categories of means, such as assassination, bombings, and torture, despite the evident interdependence of means and ends.”[26] Terrorism, as a sort of catch-all for such tactics, is, as seen, a similarly vitriolic term – perhaps even more so. As such it is unsurprising that those who hold that it is the means adopted by terrorists that distinguish them as such tend themselves to identify with the victims of terrorism. Frequently, the advocates of this approach have been on the receiving end of the violence they term terrorism. They also often represent, or belong to, those interests (usually states) which seek to maintain the status quo that the terrorist often seeks to change.[27]

On first appearance, the methods of the terrorist appear almost identical to those of the guerilla, with both bombing civilian areas, carrying out assassinations, and seizing hostages. Moreover, the same intention to influence behavior through intimidation is also present in both groups. However, guerillas differ from terrorists in that they tend to form larger, more heavily-armed organizations that control territorial zones. While groups will sometimes conduct both guerilla and terrorist campaigns, often simultaneously – such as is currently the case with al Qaeda for instance – terrorism and guerilla warfare are not the same thing.

As this illustrates, while identifying terrorism by the methods used is perhaps the most practical means of arriving at a workable definition of the term, this is only true if general agreement can be reached as to how to differentiate terrorist means from non-terrorist means. Where such terrorist means co-exist with the political motivation discussed above, defining terrorism becomes easier. In addition, while their identity alone is insufficiently subjective a basis to help identify the perpetrators of political violence as terrorists, the identity of their victims – namely their status as ‘legitimate’ or ‘illegitimate targets’ – is not. Again, the use of such a determinant is dependent on agreement being reached as to what constitutes a non-combatant in such instances.

None of which is to say that Laqueur’s warning on the impossibility of formulating a generally agreed upon definition of terrorism is likely to become any less true any time soon. However, as argued, this does not necessarily make such a definition – or efforts to arrive at it – any less desirable.

[1] Most of the texts referred to below include extensive sections which address the issue of defining terrorism, and the reader is referred to these for a more detailed analysis of the problems this entails.


[7] Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002, US Department of State Publication 11038 (Washington, DC: State Department, April 2003), p. 13. Online at: http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/20177.pdf This document further states: “For purposes of this definition, the term “noncombatant” is interpreted to include, in addition to civilians, military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty.”


[21] Bruce Hoffman cites Sirhan’s case as representative of the difficulty of considering such instances of individuals carrying out such acts alone (albeit with political motivations), whereas Paul R. Pillar cites the example of Kansi in arguing that such actions should be considered terrorism. See, Hoffman, p. 42, and Pillar, p. 43. On
balance, Pillar’s argument seems the most sustainable.


[23] See, Patterns of Global Terrorism 2002 for a listing of those groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations – none of whom describe themselves thus.

[24] For one definition of ‘non-combatant’ see note 7, above.


[27] Clearly this is not universally the case. For instance loyalist terrorist groups in Northern Ireland could be argued to have begun life with the intent of defending the status quo.