

CONCEPTUAL DILEMMA OF TERRORISM

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Abstract

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. The world has experienced it, in different face and different demonstration since ancient times. It has a long history, but scholars have not yet agreed on a single definition of the concept. This article seeks to explore the evolution of terrorism and the reasons why it is problematic to find an all-encompassing definition. Its aim is to identify the phenomenon of terrorism, distinguish it from violence and force, and define its characteristics that have not gained consensus so far. This article pursues a qualitative, descriptive and analytical method based on secondary sources. The study reveals similarities and differences in the understanding of terrorism and sheds light on the elements that are considered critical to the definition. The controversy around the definition of terrorism as an element of insurgency, guerrilla warfare or political violence, as a method or a strategy, as a tactic or a system is still present. The article concludes that it might not be beneficial to dogmatically fix the definition of terrorism, while attempting to manage the phenomenon, but instead consider it as a process that requires comprehensive approaches and solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is not a new development; it has accompanied human societies across every era of recorded history. The advancement of communication and information turned it into one of the most serious threat for humankind. Before organized states existed war against one another individuals and small bands already resorted to terror-like tactics in pursuit of narrow objectives. Although its tools and objectives have shifted considerably across history, the core features of terrorism—fear, panic, violence, and disruption have remained remarkably constant. In the Twenty-first century, terrorism continues to pose a critical danger to peace and security around the world. It has since assumed a far more central position on the global stage, taking on dimensions that were previously unseen. The character of terrorism shifts depending on the issue at hand and the country involved. Yet the scale of violence

employed by present-day terrorists, together with the responses it provokes, signals that the world has entered what might fairly be called an “Age of Terrorism,” carrying grave consequences for security at the national, regional, and international levels. Among the gravest dangers are threats to public safety and welfare, the stability of state institutions, sound economic growth, the spread of democratic governance, and even the survival of civilization itself. Considerable effort has gone into addressing the underlying causes of terrorism and devising effective countermeasures, yet none of these efforts has produced a lasting solution. As Paul R. Pillar puts it, terrorism is “a challenge to be managed but not solved”.⁵

2. Historical Evolution of Terrorism

To understand the character and significance of terrorism as it exists today, it is useful first to trace some of its historical roots.

The historical record offers extensive evidence of terrorism's persistent presence and its wide-ranging, layered manifestations across time. Far from being a modern invention, it predates even the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome.

The English political vocabulary first admitted the word "terrorism" in 1795, during the French Revolution. Specifically, it was attached to the Jacobin period of 1793-94 under Robespierre, an era that came to be remembered as the "Reign of Terror." The phrase denoted a system of terror-rule through intimidation exercised by the state itself. New revolutionary phase in which the government treated thousands of citizens as suspects, accusing them of resisting the sweeping transformation then underway in French society.

Before the Revolution, no purely secular basis existed for justifying acts of terror; only religious authority carried that legitimizing power, which is why studies of sacred terror remain scarce. Rapoport's 1989 study compares several religiously motivated groups—the Assassins of Islam, active between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries; the Jewish Zealots of the first century AD; and the Hindu Thugs, who operated from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries)—showing that, despite relying on primitive tools, these groups proved more destructive and longer-lasting than many secular terrorist organizations of the present day. Their success rested on inventive organization, well-suited methods, and a favourable public response, including international backing.

Until the eleventh century, terrorism largely continued along the lines established in the ancient world. A shift in the methods of applying violence emerged during the eleventh century itself, and by the medieval period various psychological forms of terror had come into use. In its earliest uses, terror was regarded chiefly as a tool of intimidation employed either in governance or in warfare. The pivotal turning point in terrorism's evolution came after the French Revolution, during the "Reign of Terror" (1793-94), when what had once been an unlawful means of suppressing political rivals was transformed into an accepted instrument of

official state policy—giving rise to what is now termed state terrorism.

Russian revolutionaries, together with anarchists and nationalists, produced three distinct strands of terrorist activity across history. One of these, "anarchist terrorism," is linked by most scholars to the idea of "propaganda of the deed." Unlike the more calculated terrorism of the late twentieth century, this approach was never fully systematic, though it was also never random—its targets were always deliberately chosen. The anarchist thinker Kropotkin, who coined the phrase "propaganda of the deed," argued that spreading the anarchist message to the wider population required terrifying governments into producing a revolutionary climate of political and social insecurity.

Both older and newer expressions of terrorism surfaced prominently in the revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as in the colonial and civil conflicts of that period, including during and after the First World War. Socialist revolutionary movements waged terror campaigns directed squarely against ruling regimes, aiming to topple those governments and replace them with a government led by the people themselves. Their assassination campaigns grew even more extensive than those of the "People's Will" movement, which had emerged in 1879 with the aim of overthrowing czarist autocracy in favour of a liberal constitutional order.

European and American anarchists carried this pattern of social revolution into the nineteenth century, with Southern Europe becoming the most visible stage for revolutionary anarchism. Assassination emerged as a dominant tactic among these revolutionaries during this era: victims included the President of France, the Empress of Austria-Hungary, the Spanish foreign minister, and the King of Italy. In the United States, anarchists killed President William McKinley in 1901 and former Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg in 1905.

Following the First World War, terrorism took on a different character during the 1920s and 1930s. It grew increasingly institutionalized as power-hungry factions pursued political transformation

without restraint. Heavy-handed tactics that trampled basic human rights became standard practice in Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, Romania, Greece, and Hungary. Set against the defeatist mood and economic hardship of the 1930s, terror expanded dramatically, emerging as a major instrument of state power. The fascist movements led by Hitler and Mussolini flourished precisely because they mobilized the masses both physically and symbolically, extending their reach well beyond their own countries' borders. In 1937 Nazi Germany directed terror against Spain from the air, while Mussolini did the same to Ethiopia; Hitler then carried terror into Austria in 1938 and crossed into Czechoslovak territory that same year and again in 1939.¹⁴

The years immediately following the Second World War gave rise to a fresh form of terrorism, coinciding with an era in which colonized peoples sought independence from the European powers Britain and France. Later, as the bipolar Cold War order gave way to a multi-polar world, the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered sweeping social and economic upheaval, sparking a fresh surge of nationalism, separatism, and demands for basic human rights.¹⁵

Once the Cold War ended, terrorism gradually loosened its ties to state and government sponsorship. While some terrorist groups continued to receive backing from states, this support diminished considerably overall—largely because Russia, Europe, and the United States, emerging from the Cold War, coordinated policies aimed at ending state sponsorship of terrorist activity.¹⁶

By the early 1980s, terrorism had come to be viewed in some circles as a deliberate strategy for destabilizing the West, part of a broader global conspiracy. Claire Sterling's book *Terror Network* helped popularize this idea among a receptive US presidential administration and comparably inclined governments elsewhere, framing what were often unconnected terrorist incidents committed by unrelated groups worldwide as part of a single coordinated threat. By the early 1990s, new terms such as narco-terrorism and the so-called "gray area phenomenon" had further

complicated the meaning of "terrorism." The former label described how certain governments and terrorist organizations—identified with the Marxist-Leninist regimes of the Soviet Union, Cuba, Bulgaria, and Nicaragua, among others—used the drug trade to advance their political aims.

3. Conceptualizing and Defining Terrorism

Countless researchers, scholars, and political scientists have attempted to pin down a definition of terrorism, producing a vast array of proposed definitions in the process. None, however, has managed to capture every dimension of the phenomenon in a single, all-encompassing formulation.

Both "terror" and "terrorism" trace back to the Latin verb *terrere*, meaning to cause trembling, and to the related term *deterre*, meaning to frighten away. Terror itself describes a psychological condition—a state of intense fear and anxiety. Adding the suffix "-ism," however, moves the concept beyond pure psychology and situates it instead within the domain of belief systems and ideology. Paul Wilkinson makes an important point when he observes that political terrorism can only be properly understood within the framework of the ideologies, beliefs, and lifestyles that give rise to terrorist or potentially terrorist movements. Neither the word "terrorism" nor "terrorist" entered common usage until the 1790s, During the French Revolution. Edmund Burke is credited with first using the term.

The scholarly literature offers a wide range of definitions and viewpoints, which are generally grouped into four broad categories. The first consists of academic definitions crafted by political scientists striving for maximum objectivity. The second comes from government agencies tasked with practically addressing terrorism-related problems. The third reflects the perspective of segments of the public who are potential targets of terrorist violence. The fourth captures how terrorists themselves, and their sympathizers, view their own actions.

In a well-known study, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman reviewed 109 distinct definitions of terrorism gathered through a survey of leading

experts in the field. He identified several recurring elements and ranked them by how frequently each appeared: violence topped the list at 83 percent, closely followed by force at 83.5 percent, with political motivation appearing in 65 percent, the inducement of fear in 51 percent, threats in 47 percent, psychological effects and anticipated reactions in 41.5 percent, a distinction between targets and victims in 37.5 percent, planned and systematically organized international action in 32 percent, and reference to methods, strategy, or tactics of combat in 30.5 percent.

4. Violence, Force and Power

The Dictionary of Political Thought treats violence as an attribute of force, describing force as violent when it “violates” i.e. if it breaks and destroys that to which it is applied”.

Oleg Zinam offers a narrower definition, describing violence simply as “an illegitimate use of force”.

A more thorough treatment comes from van den Haag, who defines violence as follows:

“Violence as Physical Force used by a person directly or through weapon to hurt, destroy or control another, or to damage, destroy, control an object”. He used “violence as a synonym of physical force and when necessary to qualify it on a legitimate or illegitimate”.

Physical force, in turn, can be understood as political power translated into action, since force ultimately serves as an instrument through which political power operates. Force and power, while closely related, remain conceptually distinct. Morgenthau offers a useful account of political power, describing it this way:

“Political power is a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised. It gives the former control over certain actions of the latter through the influence which the former exercise over the latter’s mind.

Once the distinction between terrorism and violence is drawn, it becomes evident that terrorism encompasses both actual violence and the threat of violence, spanning physical acts as well as psychological forms of intimidation. Yet terrorism is more than violence alone: it consists

of violent acts specifically intended to reach and influence a broader audience, functioning as a message when carried out by insurgent actors.

5. Academic Definitions of Terrorism

Turning to academic definitions specifically, the 1796 Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française describes terrorism as

“the systematic use of terror or unpredictable violence against governments or public or individuals to attain political objectives”.

The Oxford English Dictionary and Thesaurus similarly defines a terrorist as “a person who uses or favours violent and intimidating methods of coercing a government or community”. Chambers’s Twentieth Century Dictionary (1976), meanwhile, characterizes terrorism as an “organized system of intimidation”.

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines it as “the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion”.

Webster’s New World Dictionary describes terrorism as “the act of terrorizing, use of force or threats to demoralize, intimidate, and subjugate especially such use as a political weapon or policy (2) the demoralization and intimidation produced in this way”. The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations offers a similarly concise definition: “The use or threatened use of violence on systematic basis to achieve political objectives”. Beyond these dictionary-style academic definitions, a number of prominent scholars, writers, and political scientists have proposed their own formulations. Steven L. Spiegel, for instance, defines terrorism as: “The use of violence by an individual or group, designed to create extreme anxiety in a target group larger than the immediate victims, with the purpose of coercing that group into meeting certain political demands”.

This definition highlights four essential elements: intentionality, the creation of fear, a target extending beyond the immediate victims, and an underlying political motive. Eugene Walter offers a related view, describing terrorism

“As a process of terror, having three elements: the act or threat of violence, the emotional reaction to extreme fear on the potential future victims, and

social effects that follow the violence or (its threat) and the consequent fear.

Both definitions agree that terrorism is fundamentally a violent political act—there is no terrorism without violence and coercion.

Alex P. Schmid, attempting to reconcile these various perspectives, ultimately argues that no single “correct” definition of terrorism can exist, since terrorism itself is an abstract concept without a fixed, concrete referent, making it impossible for any one definition to account for every use of the term. Schmid instead describes terrorism as:

“As a method of combat in which the victims serve as symbolic targets. Violent actors are able to produce a chronic state of fear by using violence outside the realm of normative behaviour. This produces an audience beyond the immediate victim and results in a change of public attitudes and actions”.

James M. Poland offers a somewhat different formulation, describing terrorism as the premeditated, deliberate, and systematic murder, destruction, and intimidation of innocent people, intended to instill fear and thereby secure a political or tactical advantage, generally by influencing an audience.

6. Governmental and Institutional Definitions

Turning next to the second broad category of definitions—those developed by government agencies—these tend to draw on either a political or a legal approach and are generally more concise and generalized, which allows for wider application. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation defines terrorism as:

“The unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment therefore, in furtherance of political or social objectives”.

The US State Department, meanwhile, cites Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 265f(d), which defines terrorism as premeditated, politically motivated violence directed against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

The United Nations, for its part, defines terrorism as: “Criminal acts, intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror, in the general public.....for political purposes. Elsewhere it adds that “the purpose of such an act, by its nature or content, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act”. The US Department of Defense, in a 1990 definition, described terrorism as:

“Terrorism as: unlawful use (or threatened use) of premeditated force or violence against individuals or property (government or civilian) by a group to coerce or intimidate governments or societies (civilian groups) or individuals to achieve political or religious or ideological (social) objectives”.⁴⁹

SAARC’s additional protocol, meanwhile, holds that: “Any person commits an offense within the meaning of this additional protocol. If that person by any means, directly or indirectly, unlawfully and willfully, provides or collects funds with the intention that they should be used or in the knowledge they are to be used, in full or in part in order to carry out any [.....] act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or content, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or international organization to do or abstain from doing an act”.⁵⁰ Taken together, these definitions make clear that even agencies operating within a single government have failed to settle on one universally accepted definition of terrorism. Researchers who have examined more than twenty official American documents on the subject have likewise noted that different documents apply the label “terrorism” to different actions and activities.

7. Public Perceptions and the Views of Sympathizers

Each of these definitions ultimately reflects the specific priorities and interests of the agency or organization that produced it. Meanwhile, a portion of the public—those most likely to be targeted by terrorist violence—tends to form opinions shaped largely by media coverage and public polling, generally in response to particular

acts, such as assassinations, bombings, or aircraft hijackings, that pose a direct threat to them.

A fourth group consists of terrorism's advocates, sympathizers, and admirers, who view such acts very differently than the victims do and openly support the perpetrators. Marinus van der Lubbe's revolutionary commando, operating within the Federal Republic of Germany, expressed this outlook plainly:

"It must be clear that the so-called terrorism is a logical and rightful resistance of the people against state terrorism, capitalism, racism, sexism and imperia

CONCLUSION

Several difficulties remain unresolved when it comes to defining terrorism. Terrorism is a multifaceted, its interpretation shifts as its underlying motives, strategies, and tactics change over time. The concept means different things to different observers. Each scholar tends to describe it through the lens of their own socio-economic and political circumstances, which is why no single, comprehensive definition covering its character, motives, and modes of operation has ever gained universal agreement..

A further difficulty concerns who has the authority to decide who counts as a terrorist and who does not. Scholars also disagree on whether terrorism should be classified as a strategy, a method, a system, a tactic, or something else entirely, and no single classification manages to capture every issue and problem connected with the concept. A further complication is that many existing definitions are grounded in a Western perspective and often diverge sharply from how the term is understood in the developing world. Where to draw the boundary between terrorism and other forms of political violence

A final problem lies in how loosely the term terrorism is applied alongside related concepts such as guerrilla warfare, revolution, insurgency, and the notion of the freedom fighter.

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