

Essay summary of terrorism

[Society](#), [Terrorism](#)



The word terrorism seems as though it would be easy to define. It is a word nearly everyone is familiar with, and yet it is difficult to grasp a clear definition of what the term entails. Terrorism, as used in today's media covers a wide range of violent acts. It can be synonymous with violence, radicalism and extremism, but this was not always true. The meaning of the term has changed multiple times throughout history. This is one of the reasons it is difficult to have a firm definition of 'terrorism'.

What was once understood as terrorism may not still be so, and with many definitions circulating it is understandable that different groups would choose to apply different descriptions today. The word terrorism is often mixed with other political and military jargon tossed around by the media. The west is often quick to label groups as terrorist, without taking into account the background of the struggle. In contrast; "many non-Western nations have proved reluctant to condemn as terrorist acts what they consider to be struggles of national liberation" (North Atlantic Assembly Papers 34).

There is a divide over what should be classified as terrorism. Hamas is a Palestinian national liberation movement that struggles for "the liberation of the Palestinian occupied territories and for the recognition of the legitimate rights of Palestinians." (Hroub 17). Hamas developed out of Palestinian anger against the Israeli occupation. They have employed acts of terrorism in an attempt to drive the Israeli influence from Palestine, most notably in the use of suicide bombings targeted against civilians.

But Hamas is more than just a terrorist organization; in 2006 they achieved "a landslide victory in the elections of the Palestinian Legislative Council" (Hroub vii). A consideration of historical perspectives of terrorism and its

actions, all justifiable to its perpetrators, as well as an analysis of modern international perspectives demonstrate the challenge in defining terrorism. One reason terrorism is so difficult to define is because the meaning of the word has changed so often throughout history. There have been countless definitions provided, each attempting to describe "terrorism".

It is a word that is all too common, yet few can produce an explanatory definition. Originally, "terrorism" was a term linked with the ideals of virtue and democracy. During the French Revolution, the regime de la terreur of 1793-94 was an instrument of governance designed to intimidate and dissuade counter-revolutionaries (Hoffman 15). The revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre believed that terror was necessary in times of revolution to introduce democracy; "virtue, without which terror is evil; terror, without which virtue is helpless.

Terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an emancipation of virtue." (Palmer 126). He believes that while the purpose of these acts is to instill fear, and that they could be classified as "terrorism", but the term does not carry the negative connotation that it does today. Like modern terrorism, the desired outcome of the actions is the justification of those actions. In July 1794, Robespierre and his followers were executed and the regime de la terreur ended. "Thereafter terrorism became a term associated with the abuse of office and power - with overt 'criminal' implications." (Laqueur 11).

Up until this point, the point of view of the revolutionaries had been that the use of terror could be seen as a completely justified method for maintaining order, if the goal was virtuous. But with the revolutionaries gone, it was seen

that those who used terror as a method of swaying people were little more than criminals. The French Revolution succeeded in spreading throughout Europe feelings of dissatisfaction with monarchy. In 1857 Carlo Pisapane revolted against Bourbon rule. His rebellion failed but he was remembered for his theory of spreading ideas through actions; "The propaganda of the idea is a chimera.

Ideas result from deeds, not the latter from the former, and the people will not be free when they are educated, but educated when they are free" (Woodcock 43-4). He believed that acts of violence, while important for drawing attention to a cause, are also valuable means of educating the masses and rallying them to support a cause. In 1881, a group of radicals gathered in London for an 'anarchist conference' (Hoffman 19). At this conference they commended the recent assassination of Russian Tsar Alexander II and promoted the use of terror as an effective method of spreading ideas and promoting change.

They created 'Anarchist International', hoping to create similar anarchist groups worldwide. The public became fearful of the threat of small cells of radicals and even individuals around the world being promoted to carry out acts of violence. In reality this group involved very few cells that were "disparate and uncoordinated" (Hoffman 19), but the public's concept of an international web of radical revolutionaries willing to use violent means stuck and would become the widespread social anxiety towards terrorism we have today.

In the years before 1930, authoritarian regimes had gained power in several countries in Europe. This included Mussolini in Fascist Italy and Hitler in Nazi

Germany. These parties had gained their political power largely through harassing and intimidating political opponents. "Terror? Never," Mussolini said, describing his intimidation as simply "social hygiene, taking those individuals out of circulation like a doctor would take out a bacillus" (Laqueur 66). Mussolini believed, as Robespierre had, that terror was justified when used for the right causes.

But in the view of the public, the meaning of terrorism, just as had occurred in France in 1794, became representative of an abuse of power and mass repression of the public by totalitarian states at the hands of their dictatorial leaders. Following the Second World War, groups around the world rose up to oppose continued European colonial rule in their countries. Nationalist movements in countries including Algeria, Kenya and Cyprus employed tactics of terrorism to expel colonial powers from their homeland. The word "terrorism" once again became associated with revolution. It was also at this time that the term "freedom fighter" emerged.

This new phrase was a result of "the political legitimacy that the international community (whose sympathy and support was actively courted by many of these movements) accorded to struggles for national liberation and self-determination." (Hoffman 26). The countries fighting to remove colonial rule were fighting for independence and their efforts were supported globally. During the 1960s and 70s, nationalist and ethnic groups and ideologically motivated organizations began to use tactics of terrorism in an attempt to, as the anti-colonial groups had done, gain support within the international community.

One such movement was Hamas, as its struggle with Israel intensified. In the eyes of Hamas, Israel is “ a colonial state established by force and resulting from western colonialism and imperialism against Arabs and Muslims” (Hroub 37). If the understanding of colonial struggles as just cause, and therefore not terrorism, is extended, Hamas cannot be thought of as a terrorist group and they should more accurately be labeled freedom fighters. They are using terror tactics to gain public support and are hoping to achieve political change, but they are doing so under the banner of national liberation and independence.

This conclusion may sound baffling to Israelis; up until 2006 Hamas had been responsible for the deaths of over 1400 Israeli military personnel and civilians; including over 100 children (Hroub 55). One difficulty facing those who wish to define terrorism is the issue of state support and sponsorship. Canada has classified Hamas as an “ Islamist-nationalist terrorist organization” (Public Safety Canada). Several other countries have also designated Hamas as a terrorist organization, including the United States , United Kingdom and the European Union .

Other countries, including Russia and Norway have not, and have recognized the legitimacy of the Palestinian government consisting of Hamas and Fatah. This disagreement between countries over what constitutes a terrorist group, with every state holding its own definition of terrorism and its own list of terrorist organizations, leads to extreme difficulties in formulating a common definition of “ terrorism”. Furthermore, there are several states that openly support Hamas. “ State supporters of Hamas have included Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, and Qatar. (Levitt 171). Support

from foreign governments differ, some countries, such as Iran, provide direct funding to Hamas, while others provide military training or allow Hamas activities within their borders . Several of these supporting countries have been designated by the United States as state sponsors of terrorism. (United States Department of State). It would be easy for one to follow the western classification indicating that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that countries that support Hamas are sponsoring terrorism.

However, the political legitimacy this group holds in the Middle East should not be overlooked. “ Hamas in the eyes of many Westerners, official and lay alike, has always been reduced to a mere ‘ terrorist group’ whose only function has been to aimlessly kill Israelis. On the ground in their own country, Hamas has been seen by many Palestinians as a deeply entrenched socio-political and popular force. ” (Hroub viii) Western countries scorn the terror tactics employed by Hamas, but countries in the Middle East praise the national struggle for independence.

The party in power before Hamas, Fatah, had disappointed its people. Peace talks with Israel were losing ground, and “ mismanagement, corruption and theft came to mark Fatah’s top leaders” (Hroub xix). The public was frustrated with their current leaders, and with their state of affairs with Israel. Hamas became a party that promised change. Hamas came to represent a fight for nationalism and independence, and this was a cause the people of Palestine were happy to stand behind. The fact that the people support Hamas indicates a clear division in the world concerning justifiable steps toward an ideal.

Another difficulty in defining terrorism is the “ semantic camouflage” (Hoffman 28) that these individuals hide behind. Organizations are reluctant to associate any part of themselves with terrorism or anything hinting towards terrorist activity. For example, the group “ Freedom Fighters for Israel” sounds much less of a threat than “ Terrorist Fighters for Israel”. Groups aim to suggest images of freedom and liberation, such as the National Liberation Army, or the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, both of which have been classified as terrorist organizations by the western world. Public Safety Canada) Terrorists will never recognize themselves as such; “ We don’t see ourselves as terrorists,” says Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, spiritual leader of the terrorist group Hezbollah, “ because we don’t believe in terrorism. We don’t see resisting the occupier as a terrorist action. We see ourselves as mujihadeen who fight a holy war for the people. ” (Jamieson 33). These ‘ mujihadeen’, or holy warriors, believe, as Robespierre and Mussolini had, that when the cause is virtuous, violence is acceptable. Defining and classifying terrorism depends greatly upon ones viewpoint.

It is generally a term applied to one’s opponents, we might say; they are ‘ terrorists’, where they might say; no, we are ‘ freedom fighters’. In the west it often becomes a matter of to whom our sympathy goes. If we sympathize with the victims of the terrorist acts of a group, it becomes easier to label the responsible group as being a terrorist organization. But if we sympathize with the struggles of a group rising to contest authority, we would not label that group as terrorists. Therefore, classifying terrorism is entirely subjective.

A consideration of historical perspectives of terrorism and its actions, all justifiable to its perpetrators, as well as an analysis of modern international

perceptions and assessments demonstrate the challenge in defining terrorism. During the French Revolution the term was indicative of spreading democracy using force and fear, and that this use of force was justified. To the people affected the word was associated with abuse of power. The meaning of terrorism evolved several times after this, from a effective method of spreading ideas and promoting change, to struggling to gain independence from colonial authority.

Considering that throughout history terrorism has meant very different things to different people, one can see how different states have adopted differing interpretations of the word. An additional difficulty in defining terrorism is the multitude of additional language that surrounds the word. Terrorism and other words such as freedom or liberation have become closely tied in some areas of the world. When such seemingly opposing terms are used synonymously the term's meaning becomes convoluted. The group Hamas perhaps best exemplifies this.

Classified as a terrorist organization by the western world, Hamas emerged victorious in the Palestinian democratic elections. The Palestinian people are well aware of the terrorist activities carried out by Hamas, yet they support the group so as to free themselves from the oppression of Israel. Considering the advancements in technology and other mediums, it is alarming that we remain so primitive in our inability to identify and classify seemingly simple expressions. ? Bibliography Eke, Steven. " Moscow risks anger over Hamas visit . " March 2006. news. bbc. co. uk. March 2012 . Guardia, Anton La. Hamas is added to EU's blacklist of terror. " September 2003. telegraph. co. uk. March 2012 . Hoffman, Bruce. Inside Terrorism. New York: Columbia

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