

Terrorism: definition, history and solutions



TERRORISM: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS DEFINITION, HISTORY, AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

“ Terrorism upsets people. It does so deliberately. That is its point, and that is why it has engrossed so much of our attention in the early years of the 21st century.”

- Townshend ^[1]

Ask any ten individuals on the streets of London, Paris, Moscow, or New York for the top three issues facing the world today and one common response is likely to be *terrorism* . Inquire further about how the same people would define terrorism, when terrorism began, and how terrorism can be stopped and you will probably be faced with a myriad of answers, or maybe just looks of puzzlement. The range of responses (or lack thereof) from the public should not be surprising. Not even experts agree on responses to these seemingly fundamental questions on an issue of such importance to worldwide security, an issue that Thackrah suggests is “ one of the most intractable global problems at the start of the twenty-first century”. ^[2]

This essay begins by surveying the vast array of definitions for the term *terrorism* , providing some insight into the reasons that terrorism is so difficult for experts to define, and adopting a working definition for the term. The historical roots of terrorism will then be explored and results of a review of selected literature on possible solutions for dealing with terrorism will be introduced. Finally, a conclusion discussing the results of the literature review will be presented.

Terrorism Defined

What is terrorism? The definition assigned to the term very much depends on who you ask, although, as Hoffman writes, “ few words have so insidiously worked their way in to our everyday vocabulary”.^[3] Oots writes that terrorism has been defined in different ways by various scholars.^[4] Hoffman suggests that most individuals have vague notions of what the term means, but cannot offer precise, explanatory definitions. The Terrorism Research Center claims that “[t]errorism by nature is difficult to define”.^[5] Townshend writes that both politicians and scholars have been “ hung up” in attempting to define terrorism in a way that distinguishes it from other criminal violence and even military action.^[6] Complicating attempts to define terrorism, the meaning and usage of the term have changed over the years.^[7]

Complications aside, most people would agree that terrorism is a subjective term with negative connotations, a pejorative term, used to describe the acts of enemies or opponents. The term has moral connotations and can be used to persuade others to adopt a particular viewpoint. For instance, if an individual sympathises with the victims of terrorism, then the perpetrator is considered to be a terrorist, but if an individual sympathises with the perpetrator, then the perpetrator is considered to be a freedom fighter or is referred to by equally positive characterisations.^[8] About this, the Terrorism Research Center writes: “ One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”^[9] Whittaker distinguishes between terrorists, guerrillas, and freedom fighters in writing: “ the terrorist targets civilians”; “ the guerrilla goes for military personnel and facilities”; and “ the freedom fighter

conducts a campaign to liberate his people from dictatorial oppression, gross disarmament, or the grip of an occupying power". [10]

One author included over one hundred definitions for the term *terrorism*. [11]

Another quoted over ninety definitions and descriptions. [12] The definitions range from those that are quite simplistic to those that are equally comprehensive. The following definitions are illustrative of the broad range of thought:

- Terrorism is " violence for purposes of creating fear". [13]
- Terrorism is " politically and socially motivated violence". [14]
- " Terrorism is political violence in or against true democracies." [15]
- " Terrorism may be described as a strategy of violence designed to inspire terror within a particular segment of a given society." [16]
- " Terrorism is the most amoral of organised violence". [17]
- Terrorism is " a form of warfare...used when full-scale military action is not possible". [18]
- " Terrorism is a method of action by which an agent tends to produce terror in order to impose his domination." [19]
- " Terrorism is the systematic use of coercive intimidation, usually to service political ends. It is used to create a climate of fear. [20]
- Terrorism is " the threat or use of violence, often against the civilian population, to achieve political or social ends, to intimidate opponents, or to publicise grievances". [21]

- “ Terrorism is the use of coercive means aimed at populations in an effort to achieve political, religious, or other aims.” [22]
- Terrorism is “ politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”. [23]

Whittaker explores the complexity of defining terrorism by furnishing a comprehensive list of terrorism criteria: [24]

- The violence or threat of violence inherent in terrorism is premeditated and politically motivated for the purpose of intimidating or coercing a government or the public in general.
- The strategy of terrorism is to instil fear and insecurity.
- Sustained campaigns or sporadic incidents are applied by terrorists in conducting their unlawful activities.
- Calculated use of violence is applied against civilian, non-combatant targets.
- Acquiring, manipulating, and employing power is at the root of terrorism.
- Revolutionary terrorism attempts to completely change the political system within a state; sub-revolutionary terrorism attempts to effect change without totally replacing the existing political system.
- Terrorism consists of carefully planned goals, means, targets, and access conducted in a clandestine manner.
- The goals of terrorism focus on political, social, ideological, or religious ends. This distinguishes terrorism from other criminal activity.

- Terrorism is conducted occasionally by individuals, but most often by sub-national groups.
- An important objective of terrorism is to obtain maximum publicity.
- Increasingly, terrorist “ zones of action” are extending beyond national borders, becoming transnational in effect.

The vast number of definitions proposed for the term terrorism might make one wonder if there could ever be agreement around a common definition. For without a common understanding about what terrorism is, how can it be challenged and ultimately removed as a threat to modern civilisation?

Despite the many definitions for terrorism, there does seem to be an emerging consensus on the definition of the term, according to Jenkins. [25]

For instance, Enders and Sandler offer the following comprehensive definition of terrorism:

“ Terrorism is the premeditated use or threat of use of extranormal violence or brutality by subnational groups to obtain a political, religious, or ideological objective through intimidation of a huge audience, usually not directly involved with the policy making that terrorists seek to influence.” [26]

Enders and Sandler’s definition will be used for the purpose of this essay not only because it is an example of a current consensus description, but also because it contains criteria suggested by other definitions surveyed in the literature review – violence or threats of violence; intimidation of large civilian audiences; desire to influence; subnational terrorist groupings; and political, religious, or ideological objectives.

Historical Roots of Terrorism

Colin Gray writes that terrorism “ is as old as strategic history”.^[27] The roots of terrorism can be traced back in time to ancient Greece, and terrorist acts have occurred throughout history since that time. The term terrorism, however, originated in the French Revolution’s *Reign of Terror*^[28] and was popularised at that time.^[29] Terrorism in this era carried a very positive connotation as it was undertaken in an effort to establish order during the anarchy that followed uprisings in France in 1789. It was considered to be an instrument of governance instituted to intimidate counter-revolutionaries, dissidents and subversives and was associated with the ideals of democracy and virtue. In fact, according to Hoffman, the revolutionary leader Maximillien Robespierre claimed that “ virtue, without which terror is evil; terror, without which virtue is helpless” and that “[t]error is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue”.^[30]

Terrorism at the start of the twentieth century retained the revolutionary connotations it had acquired during the French Revolution as it took aim on the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. In the 1930s, the meaning of terrorism mutated to describe activities of totalitarian governments and their leaders against their citizenry in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalinist Russia. For instance, in Germany and Italy, gangs of “ brown shirts” or “ black shirts” harassed and intimidated opponents, although leaders of these nations denied that this occurred. After World War II, the meaning of terrorism changed once again, returning to its revolutionary connotations where it remains today. Terrorist activities in the 1940s and 1950s primarily focused

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on revolts by indigenous nationalist groups opposing colonial rule in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, resulting in independence for many countries. Although terrorism retained its revolutionary connotation in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus shifted from anti-colonialist to separatist goals. Today, terrorism involves broader, less distinct goals. ^[31] The right-wing and left-wing terrorism that became widespread in recent times included acts by diverse groups such as the Italian Red Brigades; the Irish Republican Army; the Palestine Liberation Organisation; the Shining Path in Peru; the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka; the Weatherman in the United States; various “ militia” organisations, also in the United States; radical Muslims through Hamas and Al Qaeda; radical Sikhs in India; and the Aum Shinrikyo in Japan. ^[32] Some governments, such as those in Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, are also considered to be involved in terrorism as sponsors of terrorist activities. ^[33] Some people, such as American dissident Noam Chomsky, contend that the government of the United States is engaged in terrorism, as exemplified by the title of Chomsky’s 2001 article entitled “ U. S.—A Leading Terrorist State”, which appeared in the *Monthly Review* ^[34] .

Terrorism associated with the French Revolution had two important characteristics in common with terrorism today. Firstly, terrorism was, and is today, organised, deliberate, and systematic. Secondly, the goals of terrorism then and now were and are to create a new, better society. ^[35] But, terrorism today has changed in some very fundamental ways: (1) terrorist organisations have evolved into network forms and are less often organised in hierarchies; (2) the identities of transnational terrorist

organisations are harder to identify because they claim responsibility for specific acts less often; (3) today's terrorist groups do not make demands as often as in the past and their goals appear to be more hazy and vague; (4) motives have generally shifted from those that are more politically-oriented to those that are more religiously-oriented; (5) targets of terrorists are more dispersed around the globe; and (6) terrorist violence, today, is more indiscriminate, involving significant collateral damage to the public. [36]

With this historical foundation, particularly the description of the evolution of terrorism into its current form, the focus now shifts to possible solutions to dealing with the issue today.

Possible Solutions to Terrorism

To effectively meet the challenges of terrorism, one should consider the history of terrorism, but must also look to the future. Kress and colleagues contend that terrorism is increasing in “ geographical scope, numerical frequency, and intensity” as well as in “ ingenuity and subtlety”. They suggest that these trends could well translate into more varied threats and more powerful tools and weapons, adding that “ bombs will get smaller and more powerful, poisons and mind-blowing drugs more insidious, psychological techniques for converting or brainwashing the victims more effective, and psychological tortures more agonizing.” [37]

Ian Lesser offers a comprehensive approach for meeting the challenges of terrorism. His approach consists of a core strategy and supporting strategies aimed at targeting security threats posed by terrorists within a context of global security threats from all sources. Lesser's core strategy consists of

four components: (1) reducing systemic causes of terrorism, (2) deterring terrorists and their sponsors, (3) reducing risks associated with “superterrorism”, and (4) retaliating in instances where deterrence fails. In reducing system causes of terrorism, Lesser is referring to the long-term goal of addressing issues that give rise to terrorism such as social and economic problems, unresolved ethnic and nationalist conflicts, frustrated political ambitions, and personal experiences of individuals who may become future terrorists. In deterring terrorists and their sponsors, Lesser suggests taking “massive and personal” actions against terrorist leadership, although he concedes that this is becoming more and more difficult as terrorists and their sponsors become more diverse and diffuse. In reducing risks associated with “superterrorism”, Lesser calls for eliminating weapons of mass destruction that terrorists could use in inflicting destruction and suffering. And, finally, in retaliating when deterrence fails, Lesser suggests developing the means to retaliate quickly and specifically to terrorist activities. [38]

One of Lesser’s strategies supporting his core strategy is “environmental shaping”, which involves exposing sponsors of terrorism to global scrutiny and isolation; shrinking the “zones of chaos and terrorist sanctuary; including counterterrorism as an integral component of strategic alliances; limiting global exposure; and targeting terrorist networks and funding. His “hedging strategy” involves hardening key policies and strategies to limit risks of terrorism, increasing ground and space-based surveillance of terrorist resources, and preparing to mitigate the effects of terrorism to limit negative effects. [39]

Kress and associates reiterate the first component of Lesser's core strategy in offering their proactive approach to dealing with terrorism; specifically, addressing "genuine political injustice" and resolving "supposed injustices".

[40] Chalk contends that a state response to terrorism must be "limited, well-defined and controlled" to avoid compromising "the political and civil traditions that are central to the liberal democratic way of life". He suggests that "any liberal democratic response to terrorism has to rest on one overriding maxim: a commitment to uphold and maintain constitutional principles of law and order". [41]

Conclusion

The long history of terrorism, dating as far back as ancient Greece, suggests that this phenomenon may never be eliminated as a tactic by those people or groups without sufficient formal legal power to achieve their goals.

However, this does not imply that terrorism cannot be engaged proactively and reactively. Logically, it seems that the first step should be to agree on a universally-accepted definition for terrorism because, without a consensus on the meaning of the term, effectively addressing its causes and its effects may be difficult at best and impossible at worst.

With a consensus definition in hand, the comprehensive strategy for dealing with terrorism proposed by Lesser – reduction in systemic causes, deterrence, "superterrorism" risk reduction, and retaliation – would appear to offer the most balanced, effective approach. Today's leaders should realise that offensive and defensive military action, so typical of traditional warfare, is quite ineffective as a sole method for dealing with modern forms

of terrorism as demonstrated by failures experienced by Israel in dealing with the Palestinian terrorist problem and the greater-than-expected difficulties experienced by the United States, the United Kingdom, and others in ridding the world of radical Islamic terrorists. These efforts may not only fail to ultimately deal effectively with preventing terrorist activities, but may also produce more terrorists who are offended by military actions.

Alternatively, a holistic approach – one which includes proactive prevention and reactive punishment measures such as the approach advocated by Lesser – should be employed.

In any solution to the global problem of terrorism, the cautionary advice offered by Peter Chalk should be considered; that is, political and civil liberties should not be sacrificed in responding to the terrorist threat. For the very way of life the governments of free societies are trying to protect in their attempts to combat terrorism could be compromised by actions that are not limited, well-defined and controlled. Interestingly, this thought was eloquently proffered more than two centuries ago by American inventor, journalist, printer, and statesman Benjamin Franklin in warning that “[t]hose who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

The recommendation, then, is to deal with terrorism in a holistic, balanced manner stressing proactive and reactive measures whilst preserving political and civil liberties.

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Footnotes

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