

# Distinction of terrorists in political violence politics essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Violence has been a continuous problem for politics for many years, with terrorism becoming a more prominent form of violence in politics. Although the international community does not agree with acts of terrorism, in their minds, terrorists feel they have a good reason to do what they do.

This essay will begin by defining both terrorism and political violence, then go on to discuss both political violence and terrorism in order to show that they are related as forms of violence. In my opinion, the definition of these two forms of violence is of importance because the international community in general views political forms of violence as an aid towards political reform movements of numerous kinds. On the contrary, this same international community generally condemns the form of violence that is labelled “terrorism”. There is therefore the need to show the correlation between the two as they both involve random targeting of civilians and both forms of violence are inspired by a desire to accomplish political change. In addition, once the extent of political violence goes beyond a certain boundary, then even legitimate freedom fighters would be labelled as terrorists by the international community. Therefore, it raises questions about the morality of terrorism that could displace terrorism from its moral status as the signifier of absolute evil in our society. In this essay it will also be attempted to lay out the framework of terrorism, and in doing so, it will also be considered whether terrorist acts are morally any different from acts of political violence. This will include the analysis of some of the differences between political violence and terrorism in order to clarify if within these differences moral distinction can be found. Kantian and Utilitarian will be used as moral frameworks to show some understanding of the nature of the moral

responsibility in political violence. It will then be argued that terrorism is a form of political violence, and that there is no difference between the two sets of actions. Furthermore, the view that most of the differences that are perceived between these two sets of actions come about due to an ideology that terrorism stands for evil will be put forward, and that terrorism should be used if often politically necessary.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **What is Terrorism?**

Webster's dictionary defines terrorism as the systematic use of terror or fear especially as a means of coercion.[1] Another definition of terrorism is the calculated use of violence (or the threat of violence) against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or religious or ideological in nature; this is done through intimidation or coercion or instilling fear)[2] However, the definition of terrorism has proven to be controversial. The international community has not been able to create a universally agreed, legally binding definition of terrorism. While briefing the Australian Parliament, Angus Martyn stated that, " The international community has never succeeded in developing an accepted comprehensive definition of terrorism. During the 1970s and 1980s, the United Nations attempts to define the term foundered mainly due to differences of opinion between various members about the use of violence in the context of conflicts over national liberation and self-determination." [3] These differences have therefore made it impossible for the United Nations to come to a comprehensive agreement on terrorism that encompasses a single, legal, criminal law definition of terrorism. [4] However, the international community has embraced a chain of conventions that

define numerous types of terrorist activities. In addition to this, the United Nations General Assembly has continuously condemned terrorist acts by using the following description of terrorism: “ Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.[5]

Terrorism in the beginning of the twentieth century retained the revolutionary implication 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 example, in Germany and Italy, gangs of brown shirts or black shirts harassed and intimidated opponents. However, leaders of these nations denied that this occurred. After World War II, the meaning of terrorism changed once again, returning to its revolutionary implications where it remains today. Terrorist activities in the 1940s and 1950s primarily focused 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 implications in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus shifted from anti-colonialist to separatist goals. Today, terrorism involves broader, less distinct goals. 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 and the radical Sikhs in India. Some governments, such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, are also considered to be involved in terrorism and as sponsors of terrorist activities due to their continuous wars. It is also believed that they do have Al Qaeda networks, Iraq being the prime target at the moment as a result of the September 11th attacks on the United States. Some people like Noam Chomsky[6], stated that the government of the United States is engaged in terrorism, as shown by the title of Chomsky's 2001 article.[7]

## **What is Political Violence?**

Political violence is commonly referred to by the terms terrorism, rebellion, war, conquest, revolution, oppression, tyranny, and many others. In general, it can be defined as committing violent actions against others with the intended purpose of effecting a change in their actions.[8]

Having said this, why is a debate about the difference between terrorism and other types of political violence so important? It seems to be, due to the undefined definition of terrorism, yet the debate about the similarities or differences of political violence and terrorism has not really been considered. What then are the implications of not having this debate? There is a reason why the issue of political violence and terrorism have been overlooked. The roughness of the original anti-terrorism proposals evidently reflected the haste with which they were prepared after 9-11. But as a result of this, there was the failure to mark any distinction between terrorism and political

<https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>

violence. Consequently, civil liberties advocates have concentrated on making sure that familiar and more recognised forms of political activity, for example; nonviolent civil disobedience and work stoppages would not be labelled as terrorism. However, in order to analyse the possible significant differences between terrorism and political violence, a case study about the Israeli soldier and the suicide bomber will be discussed.

## **The distinction between Terrorism and Political Violence.**

### **Case study of the Israeli Soldier and the Palestinian Suicide Bomber**

Making a coherent distinction between terrorism and political violence is difficult if not impossible. For example, subnational groups in a secessionist movement may at times engage in acts of violence that closely resemble acts of terrorism in that there may be the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, among other things.

“ Freedom fighters and terrorists are not mutually exclusive categories. Terrorists can also fight for national liberation, and freedom fighters can also carry out inhumane atrocities”. [9]

We could say that there are several forms of direct and explicit political violence. When one's state created deliberate and purposeful political violence against another state we may call it a just act of war. This may include terrifying a civilian population and its military and political leaders into submission, and example of this is the strategy used towards the U. S./Iraq war. As we have already seen, during war, some forms of violence are more legitimate than others. In general, for example, civilian populations are

to be spared from some forms of political violence, like military violence. However, achieving civilian protection has become more and more difficult as civilians become part of the infrastructure of the military. In the era of total war that marked most of the twentieth century, Saddam Hussein could find ample authority for his attack on the Kurds in Northern Iraq during the Iran-Iraqi war and in the aftermath of his defeat against allied forces in the Gulf War. This in turn expanded the risk of harming civilian populations in the war efforts and increased infant mortality to an estimated 500, 000 children resulting from the economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations. Yet even this did not cross the terror threshold.

Rape, as another example was used as an instrument of terror in Serbia. The United States used nuclear weapons on two Japanese cities just as Germany bombed civilian populations of the United Kingdom in World War II, and the allied forces attacked Dresden. This still did not qualify as terror.

So how do we distinguish these acts of war from other acts of war and from other forms of political violence? How do we justify one and not the other since both take and risk the lives of civilians?

When we look at the cases of the both the Palestinian suicide bomber and the Israeli soldier we see they are both willing to sacrifice their life to something that they believe is worth more than them as human beings. The Palestinian is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a Palestinian homeland, and the Israeli soldier is willing to sacrifice himself for the continuation of the state of Israel and for the homeland of the Jewish people. This shows us that both of them are actually part of an integral society. They

represent a small part of a larger society. This larger society may be something completely different and greater than they are. At the same time, there is a problem as to the extent of unification expressed. For example, in the story of Abraham and Isaac in the bible, God asks Abraham to kill his son Isaac[10]. In the Christianity perspective, this is an act of violation of the moral order because even in the bible itself it is stated that that one should love one's neighbour as one love's oneself.[11]

In both terrorism and political violence such as warfare, we see that there is the abandonment of morality in the name of another cause. Does this then give both the Palestinian suicide bomber and Israeli soldier different moral standings? I do not think we can find a morally significant distinction between the soldier and the terrorist based on their virtue of frameworks.

Seeing as both terrorism and other forms of political violence tend to be based on some sense of duty, we can safely say that in both cases, people are treated as means to the end of the higher purpose they set themselves. Even the suicide bomber treats himself as a mere means to carry out his higher purpose. All political violence of any sort inevitably treats people as means towards an end as it involves the destruction of life in the name of something which is placed beyond life and functions as something which gives definition to its horizon. In his book, Bourdieu shows the importance of this social shaping by saying that it " gives what is rarest, recognition, consideration, in other words, quite simply, reasons for being. It is capable of giving meaning to life, and to death itself, by consecrating it as the supreme sacrifice." [12] Therefore noting the importance of social shaping, we can say that such meanings can clearly affect the abandonment of the moral code.

<https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>



With that being said, so far we can still see no distinct difference between terrorism and political violence.

Political violence is generally a legitimate, justifiable means to wage a long-term ideological battle against a hostile government. Political violence has been ever-present throughout human history. Many governments have met with their rival countries through the means of coup d'état, by which the rulers of these governments are violently overthrown. For example, there were acts of political violence that led to the American Revolution and the overthrowing of the British colonial rule. Numerous world leaders today ascended to power as a result of insurrection and violence, including leaders like Fidel Castro in the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Another example of political violence is the assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, who had sought to have the international community declare the country's Tamil Tiger rebels a terrorist group.[13]The Tamils have waged a violent campaign since 1983, in which 64, 000 have been killed, to form an independent state in the north.

In all these and many other situations involving internal strife, the international community generally takes the position that such matters pertain to domestic sovereignty, and are not considered as terrorism.

The major champion of utilitarianism, John Stuart Mill, argued that political violence may be justified based on what the balance of reason says is morally right in the

circumstances that is in question.[14]Williams goes on to say that Violence may be an evil, but “ if good is to come of evil it must be practised with an <https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>

awareness of the need to curtail its general tendency to produce yet more evil.”[15]

In contrast to the utilitarians’ justification of political violence, philosopher Immanuel Kant is known for his view that participation in political violence is always wrong.[16] However, some Kantian scholars believe that there is adequate space in Kant’s moral philosophy to consider political violence as morally justified

under some circumstances, subject to certain situations. For instance, one might argue with Kant and say that political violence is morally justified to avert threats to the rational agency of an oppressed people. In this case, people would be defending themselves from a fundamental violation of Kant’s authoritative categories. Moreover, an act of political violence could be justified as an act of self-respect and to assert human dignity. If violence was used a tool against an oppressive regime, then under Kant’s moral philosophy, the violence must be proportional; that is, no more violent than that which is sufficient to accomplish the end result.

The distinction, if one can be made, is important for the obvious reason that political violence is often perceived to be morally justified, while terrorism is not (except from the terrorist perspective).

In both instances there will be atrocities and violations of human rights. “ Since the end of WWII, in almost every region in the world, there have been conflicts characterized by terror. Both in terrorism and in legitimate political struggles, violence is directed by a dissident political group toward the political authorities, in an effort to avert some evil.

<https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>

Typically, domestic political struggles, around which the international community

may rally, will pertain to civil rights, anti-colonialism, secessionism, an anti-corruption movement, democratic movement, efforts to elevate the group's status in the face of a hostile government, efforts to overcome a tyrannical regime and form a new government, or other movements for political autonomy. In numerous situations in which freedom fighters are hard-pressed to attain victory, other states will offer aid or military assistance, based on the principle of humanitarian intervention.[17]

To conclude this chapter, I will say that the attempt to find the distinction between the Israeli soldier and the suicide bomber by looking at the death of civilians in terrorist attacks has emphasized the fact that this is a far worse moral breach of law than killing enemy soldiers who are prepared to be killed. However, there are two major problems with such an argument in relation to this essay. The first is that the political violence specified in the essay title is broad enough to also include assassinations, including the ones the United States made in Central America in the 1980's. Furthermore, we could say that terrorism always includes terror, whereas other political violence may or may not cause terror, and therefore the term "political violence" is preferred to "terrorism". I would say that this is a weak argument because even if this was true, this would be a difference of probability as sometimes political violence causes terror, and sometimes even intends to cause terror, and therefore it would indicate that there is no qualitative difference as such, that could give us reason to think that there is a morally significant distinction that could be made out of the two.

<https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>

## **Terrorism as Political Violence**

As stated earlier, much of the confusion over terrorism comes from the problem of definition. As stated by Rabbi Moshe Reiss in the Asian times, “ It is a certain fact that not all Muslims are terrorists, but it is equally certain, and exceptionally painful, that almost all terrorists are Muslims. Does all this tell us something about ourselves, our societies and our culture?”[18]

The interesting thing about this statement is that it continues to associate terrorism with a specific group, or set of groups. Terrorism has been practiced as a form of political activity for centuries. In my opinion, it is actually a form of political activity. However, there is nothing about terrorism that completely specifies the reasons as to which people do it. We can observe that both the ANC in South Africa and the Coptic Christians in the Lebanese civil war made use of terrorist tactics and yet neither today is called a terrorist. This is not to demonstrate the old illusion that ‘ one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.’[19]It is merely to show that the word “ terrorism”, if properly used, indicates a form of political activity. Therefore, the proper understanding of terrorism is clearly amiss from modern discussion. Just like many other reactions to violence, there is a human refusal to make violence thinkable. However, the refusal to make terrorism thinkable is also due to the convenient tarnishing of terrorism for political purposes. As a result of this, there are implications towards its moral classification.

If terrorism was something vital, and it had of evil or malicious aspects, then we could say there was a clear distinction between terrorism and political violence dedicated to protecting the good. However, there is a big issue <https://assignbuster.com/distinction-of-terrorists-in-political-violence-politics-essay/>

because terrorism appears to be subset of political violence. One good example of this is the Baader-Meinhof group[20] where we can clearly see that terrorism came forth gradually as a strategy. Before we can consider what terrorism is as a form of action, and its moral significance, we must analyse what political violence is.

Among the numerous forms of political violence, I will talk about two forms of violence: symbolic violence (which is the creating of a category of people that are conventionally unequal to you), and violence in order to effect political change (like riots or wars in foreign countries).

Terrorism should be considered alongside the form of violence that is; violence to effect political change. What is the difference between a terrorist, freedom fighter and soldier? Their distinction is really not that simple. It may be argued that what clearly distinguished the terrorist from the freedom fighter is the matter of dominance. Suicide bombers and plane hijackers all use of terror. Terror, as earlier described, is the use of terror or fear especially as a means of coercion. However this is also a characteristic of many military campaigns. Fighter-bombers and targeted defoliation campaigns clearly cause terror, and yet neither of them could be described as terrorists. With that being said, the similarity between the two depends on the degree to which political struggle is fought on the same domain.

Philosophers have expressed different views about the question of whether particular terrorist acts, such as killing civilians, can be justified as the lesser evil in a particular circumstance. According to David Rodin, utilitarian philosophers are able to come up with cases in which the evil of terrorism is

outweighed by the good which could not be achieved in a less morally costly way, in practice the “ harmful effects of undermining the convention of non-combatant immunity is thought to outweigh the goods that may be achieved by particular acts of terrorism”.[21]

## **Conclusion**

This essay has analysed the nature of terrorism as a subcategory of political violence, and in doing so it has argued that terrorism does not have an essential nature that could allow certain judgments to be passed on its moral worth. It is a mode of political action. Like all modes of political violence, it requires the suspension of morality.

Unlike political violence, it would be absurd to suggest that terrorism could ever be morally justified. How could an act that is so indiscriminately violent be morally justified? If we condemn unjust wars and disproportionate attacks during military operations, if we condemn the targeting of civilians in the context of war, and if we condemn the indiscriminate attacks on the enemy’s infrastructure, are we not also committed to condemning any terrorism in which violence, or the threat of violence, is inflicted upon innocent persons?

Although the condemnation of terrorism is not a denunciation of revolutionaries or guerrilla warfare or other efforts to throw off the yoke of an oppressive regime, and it is only a reiteration of the limits of violence that the international community is willing to permit, a legitimate political struggle can become the subject of international condemnation if the mode of violence becomes unjust or disproportionate. Moreover, to terrorists, there is a different notion of what counts as unjust or disproportionate violence.

The killing of “innocents” is not murder, but a kind of vindication against the illegal policies for which the “innocents” are collectively responsible.

Terrorists view themselves as out-of-the-mainstream advocates of a revolutionary struggle who have little or no political capital. They view themselves as the victims rather than the aggressors in the struggle. From their perspective, they are seeking to avert perceived injustices or to regain territory that the terrorists believe belongs to them. They are seeking some other vindication of rights against governments that are too powerful to challenge by conventional warfare or by peaceful, diplomatic means. To them, they are freedom fighters, the enlightened ones in a mass of the unenlightened.

It is a relationship that violates the social world, and as such must remain silent. This silence can be a virtuous one, even if it is not a morally correct one. However, this stance underlies both political violence and terrorism, and in both cases, we can find no morally significant distinction between them.