

Various Definitions of Terrorism

Controversy in Defining Terrorism

The difficulty in defining "terrorism" is in agreeing on a basis for determining when the use of violence (directed at whom, by whom, for what ends) is legitimate; therefore, the modern definition of terrorism is inherently controversial. The use of violence for the achievement of political ends is common to **state** and **non-state groups**. The majority of definitions in use has been written by agencies directly associated with government, and is systematically biased to exclude governments from the definition. The contemporary label of "terrorist" is highly pejorative-- it denotes a lack of legitimacy and morality. As a practical matter, so-called acts of "terrorism" or terrorism are often a tactic committed by the actors as part of a larger military or geo-political agenda.

United Nations



The **UN General Assembly Resolution 49/60** (adopted on December 9, 1994), titled "Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism," contains a provision describing 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.

The UN Member States still have no agreed-upon definition of terrorism, and this fact has been a major obstacle to meaningful international countermeasures. Terminology consensus would be necessary for a single comprehensive convention on terrorism, which some countries favor in place of the present **12 piecemeal conventions and protocols**. Cynics have often commented that one state's "terrorist" is another state's "freedom fighter".

The **Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism** was adopted by the Council of Arab Ministers of the Interior and the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice in Cairo, Egypt in 1998. Terrorism was defined in the convention as:

Any act or threat of violence, whatever its motives or purposes, that occurs in the advancement of an individual or collective criminal agenda and seeking to sow panic among people, causing fear by harming them, or placing their lives, liberty or security in danger, or seeking to cause damage to the environment or to public or private installations or property or to occupying or seizing them, or seeking to jeopardize national resources.

UN Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004) gives a definition:

criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.

A **UN panel**, on March 17, 2005, **described terrorism** as any act "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act."

European Union

The European Union defines terrorism for legal/official purposes in Art.1 of the **Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (2002)**. This provides that terrorist offences are certain criminal offences set out in a list comprised largely of serious offences against persons and property which:

given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization.

United Kingdom

The **United Kingdom's Terrorism Act 2000** defines terrorism to include an act "designed seriously to interfere with or seriously to disrupt an electronic system". An act of violence is not even necessary under this definition.

United States

The United States has defined terrorism under the Federal Criminal Code. Title 18 of the United States Code defines terrorism and lists the crimes associated with terrorism. In Section 2331 of Chapter 113(B), defines terrorism as: "...activities that involve violent... or life-threatening acts... that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State and... appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and...(C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States..."

US Patriot Act of 2001: terrorist activities include

- threatening, conspiring or attempting to hijack airplanes, boats, buses or other vehicles.
- threatening, conspiring or attempting to commit acts of violence on any "protected" persons, such as government officials

- any crime committed with "the use of any weapon or dangerous device," when the intent of the crime is determined to be the endangerment of public safety or substantial property damage rather than for "mere personal monetary gain"

FBI definition of terrorism: The unlawful use of force or 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.

U.S. Army Manual definition terrorism is the "calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear. It is intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies ... [to attain] political, religious, or ideological goals." U.S. Army Field Manual No. FM 3-0, Chapter 9, 37 (14 June 2001).

Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms defines terrorism as: The calculated use of unlawful violence or threat 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.

State Terrorism

State terrorism has been defined as acts of terrorism conducted by governments or terrorism carried out directly by, or encouraged and funded by, an established government of a state (country) or terrorism practiced by a government against its own people or in support of international terrorism. "**State terrorism**" is as controversial a concept as that of terrorism itself. Terrorism is often, though not always, defined in terms of four characteristics: (1) the threat or use of violence; (2) a political objective; the desire to change the status quo; (3) the intention to spread fear by committing spectacular public acts; (4) the intentional targeting of civilians. This last element--**targeting innocent civilians**—is problematic when one tries to distinguish state terrorism from other forms of state violence.

Democratic regimes may foster state terrorism of populations outside their borders or perceived as alien; but they do not terrorize their own populations because a regime that is truly based on the violent suppression of most citizens (not simply some) would cease to be democratic. Dictatorships terrorize their own populations; democracies do not; but they can engage in state sponsored terrorism in other countries.

Declaring war and sending the military to fight other militaries is not terrorism, nor is the use of violence to punish criminals who have been convicted of violent crimes, but many would argue that democracies are also capable of terrorism. Israel has for many years been characterized by critics, especially in the Arab world, United Nations Resolutions, and human rights organizations, as perpetrating terrorism against the population of the territories it has occupied since 1967.

Critics also accuse the United States of terrorism for backing not only the Israeli occupation, but other repressive regimes willing to terrorize their own citizens to maintain power. Palestinian militants call Israel terrorist, Kurdish militants call Turkey terrorist, Tamil militants call Indonesia terrorist; and, of course, the nation-states call the militants who oppose their regimes "terrorists". Like "beauty", "terrorism" is in the eye of the beholder. One man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Hence, the difficulty in defining **TERRORISM**.