

## **Perspectives on Terrorism**

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### **Abstract**

There are a variety of definitions of terrorism, which have changed over time and geographically, and which reflect different perspectives even at a given moment in history. This paper explores the reasons for varying descriptions of terrorism by taking into account influencing factors such as history, politics and culture. I will try to portray the importance and complexities of different perspectives, and the role that limited definitions of terrorism may play in the shaping of opinions around the world—opinions that in some cases reflect a marked bias. With this I hope to provide a brief overview of the multitude of perceptions regarding terrorism.

**Keywords:** terrorism, terrorist, definition, perspective, perception.

### **Introduction**

Terrorism results from a complex web of conditioning and precipitating factors (Crenshaw, 1981), reasoning and ideologies that are embedded in historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. As commonly used today, terms like “terrorism” and “terrorists” tend to focus on limited definitions that reinforce a specific concept that is, in part, intensified by media coverage of terrorism. The difficulty of definitions is that by nature they reflect a simplification of complex subjects and as such they may influence people's perceptions. Limited definitions shape the opinions of many people across the world, possibly causing or aggravating prejudices.

With this article I would like to remind readers of the complexity of a topic like terrorism and problematize the defining of it. I will do so by exploring the variety of perspectives from which one could look at this subject, and its separate components. First I will talk about some definitions and the

different forms of terrorism that are generally distinguished. Next I will examine a few of the important factors that can influence terrorism, namely history and ideologies, in order to consider the whole picture. When looking at terrorism from a wider perspective in a way that includes its facilitating and causal factors, it becomes clear that different opinions and perceptions result in diverse definitions. These definitions in turn reflect different perceptions of terrorists.

### **Definitions and forms of terrorism**

There are a variety of definitions of terrorism. The term was first used in relation to the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century to "describe the systematic inducement of fear and anxiety to control and direct a civilian population" (Crenshaw, 1981). The Oxford Dictionary defines terrorism as "the unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims" and the Merriam-

Webster uses the following definition: "the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion." Many governments and international institutions have drafted their own definitions to distinguish terrorism from other types of criminal violence. Most of these descriptions have in common the use of terror as a means to an end, whereby this terror often involves violence against civilians. Eqbal Ahmad (1998) believes that motivation and actors should be left out of the description in order to provide a fairer definition that acknowledges the variety of motives and individuals involved in terrorist activity.

The common elements of the definitions mentioned above do not make defining terrorism any easier, since such a definition greatly depends on the perspective being used. The issue of the application of the term and its subsequent associations is related to this problem. For instance, misrepresentation is evident in the way that many people these days tend to associate the term terrorism with so-called "fundamentalist" organizations and Islam. The danger of such associated conceptions is that it may not only lead to prejudice, but may also prove counterproductive in fighting terrorism.

Terrorism can be divided into different types, usually based on motivation, but distinctions may differ according to one's point of view. Eqbal Ahmad (1998) distinguishes five types of terrorism: state, religious, mafia, pathological and political (i.e., non-state). He notes that these distinctions sometimes overlap or evolve from one to another over time. One example of overlap is when a government contracts private organizations to kill its enemies. Ahmad contends that much of the attention is focused on only one form of terrorism, namely

political terror. This however, according to him, is the form that causes the least amount of damage in terms of human lives or property. He instead claims that state terror involves the highest cost in this respect of the five different types. State terror can also function as the motivation of other types, given that terrorism is often reactive (Juergensmeyer, 2003). What is interesting about this analysis is that Ahmad (1998) notes the fixation on certain forms of terrorism, and he makes a point of reminding readers of both the other types that exist, and of the connections among motives.

A different approach to categorizing terrorism is taken by Croft and Moore (2010) who classify contemporary terrorism in terms of four threat narratives, noting that these may converge. Croft and Moore use these threat narratives to illustrate the difference in perception of terrorism between the U.S. and Britain, which in part they ascribe to the different historic experiences of both countries with terrorism. The first narrative describes terrorism as a centralized, global threat, reflecting the organizational structure of Western nation states. The second narrative focuses on networks, thereby shifting perceptions from the importance and existence of centralized leadership to networks and local structures. They describe how the third "home-grown threat" narrative evolved out of a concern with terrorism arising in the West following various attacks in Europe after 2001. Their last narrative is what they call "new terrorism," in which the perceived threat is distinguished by its apocalyptic dimension and the notion that it essentially differs from past types of terrorism.

Yet another interpretation of terrorism is offered by Juergensmeyer (2003), who suggests that religious

terrorist acts can be seen as performance violence. He points out that "terrorist acts (...) can be both *performance events*, in that they make a symbolic statement, and *performative acts*, insofar as they try to change things" (p. 127). Seeing terrorism as a performance that uses symbols (i.e., the manner in which the act is carried out or the specific location) opens up the definition to a variety of perceptions. Symbols mean different things to different people, and by looking at terrorism from this point of view, Juergensmeyer clearly shows the complexity of the topic, and how it cannot be limited to one perspective or definition.

### **History and globalization**

Terrorism is by no means a new phenomenon and, depending on the widening of the definition and inclusion of possible actors, many examples from throughout history could be given. Whereas common perceptions tend to be heavily influenced by the 2001 attacks in the United States, one could go as far back as the Crusades, roughly a thousand years ago, as an example of terrorism (Juergensmeyer, 2003). More recent examples of terrorist activity have arisen within the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the separatist ETA in Spain, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and Chechen separatists.

It is very important to consider history when analyzing terrorism. Crenshaw (1981) does so by distinguishing between preconditions and precipitants as settings of terrorism. The first expression refers to long-term dynamics or factors that can make an environment conducive to the development of terrorism. In terms of preconditions, she refers to both "enabling" and "permissive" factors" (p. 381). The second term, precipitants, refers to particular events that may

serve as immediate catalysts of terrorist acts. Crenshaw's categories emphasize the fact that terrorist activity is almost always a response and not an isolated event. Moreover, she also stresses the fact that causes may overlap and even transcend national boundaries, adding to the complexity of the subject.

Whether or not to include historical factors—or which ones to include—in the analysis of motivations for terrorist actions will depend on the perspective of the analyst. But, by leaving out historical, political, economic and socio-cultural aspects, a definition or analysis of terrorism will not serve its purpose of understanding and dealing with the subject. Furthermore if, for instance, governments make use of incomplete analyses upon which to base their responses, they might open themselves up to even more terrorist activity (Crenshaw, 1981). An example would be U.S. Cold War strategy, which had important consequences for later actions taken against that country. Not fully acknowledging the original causes or responsibility for particular problems and grievances has been a motivation for some to use terrorist acts against the U.S. (Mamdani, 2002).

Terrorism appears to have intensified in the 20th century. During the 1990s especially, globalization has been a notable influence in changing and increasing the geographic scope and reach of terror (Pillar, 2010). This means that terrorist acts can now not only be carried out more easily across national borders or controlled from different parts of the globe, but also that the indirect effects are felt around the world.

Whereas, until a few decades ago, terrorist acts were mostly local events, nowadays the victims and witnesses of these events can be found all over the globe (Juergensmeyer,

2003). The media obviously plays an important role in this and is used as such by terrorist organizations to convey their message to a worldwide public. As a result, the fear and terror caused by a terrorist attack is magnified, helping to achieve terrorists' goals (Juergensmeyer, 2003). The relationship between terrorism and the media is a subject discussed in another article in this journal.

### **Motivations and ideologies**

An incredibly wide variety of motivations can inspire terrorism. Crenshaw (1981) talks about the difficulty of discovering motives, given that explanations may not always reflect the true reasons for terrorist activity. Research is being done to attempt to answer the question as to whether psychological characteristics exist that predispose individuals to carry out acts of violence, but Crenshaw (1981) does not agree with this. Instead, she questions the usefulness of research into this topic, writing that "examination of conscious attitudes might be more revealing than a study of subconscious predispositions or personalities" (p 390). This relates back to her emphasis on the importance of looking at a situation as a whole and including possible motivators such as historical or political events. Such events may outweigh any supposed personal disposition to engage in violence.

Apart from personal or individual motivations, a variety of ideologies are claimed as explanations for terrorism. Religion is one of the most widespread sources of motivation, and various religions have inspired terrorist acts over the course of history. Juergensmeyer (2003) describes how religious activists sometimes consider themselves

participants in a cosmic war between good and evil. He explains that "cosmic" in this case refers to a transcendent and otherworldly struggle that also relates to histories of wars and battles that are portrayed in many religions. This sense of involvement can serve as a legitimization for terrorists, sometimes even without clearly defined tactics or strategy. Furthermore, explanations like these cannot be limited to any one particular religion, contrary to the emphasis in the media on Islam and its supposed proclivity for violence. Juergensmeyer (2003) shows this by applying the same theory to cases of terrorism related to the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, and the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

Power is a notorious motivator of many actions, including terrorism. Power can be either an overt or underlying motivation for a terrorist act. An underlying motivation is often hinted at when an act is openly claimed for another reason, such as religion or avenging an injustice. The search for power is usually linked to politics, but Crenshaw (1981) notes how some terrorist organizations lack either clear objectives or detailed plans to increase their political influence after committing a terrorist act. She distinguishes between short-term and long-term objectives, and she notes how immediate attention may be a group's principal aspiration. States and governments are among the most important perpetrators of terrorist violence, and their motivations vary. Brill (2003) describes how strategies employed by the U.S., such as its foreign policies and indirect support of terrorist organizations during the Cold War, can be seen as a form of nation-building through the use of fear and even violence. Related motivations in such a case are power and influence, at home or abroad, but even religious

motivations play a secondary role, since some of the justifications for terrorist acts by the Bush government derive from certain Christian values. This shows again the complexity of the subject, and the difficulty of pigeonholing it under a single label, or identifying any one reason as being the sole motivator of terrorism.

Mamdani (2002) also addresses the difficulty of distinguishing motivations by pointing to the intricate relationship among culture, religion and politics. When considering the motivating factors that can lead to terrorism, it is important to keep in mind that these factors often reinforce each other, thus creating a sense of necessity and urgency, and resulting in a false perception of a lack of alternative options. As mentioned previously, Crenshaw (1981) points to the crucial role that preconditions and precipitators may play in a society, leading terrorists to "perceive an absence of choice" (p. 396). Whether that perception reflects a real lack of possible alternative forms of action would need to be considered from a point of view sensitive to the claims that are being made.

### **Terrorists**

The term "terrorist" seems to be frequently applied nowadays not only to people who actually commit terrorist acts, but also to those who claim to sympathize with allegedly terrorist ideologies. Mamdani (2002) gives an example of this in his article, pointing out how public reasoning appears to have caused a radical distinction between "good Muslims and bad Muslims" (p. 766). He warns against misinterpretations and generalizations, writing that "by equating political tendencies with entire communities defined in non-historical cultural terms (...) this line of reasoning equates terrorists with

Muslims, justifies a punishing war against an entire country (...)" (p. 767). He continues to say that it is wrong to portray terrorists as a product of a static culture, since cultures, as well as terrorists, are both dynamic and heterogeneous.

As mentioned before, nowadays the image that will spring to the minds of many people when they hear the word "terrorist" is likely to be that of an Islamist suicide bomber or Osama Bin Laden. This is obviously an utterly biased image and not at all representative of the variety of individuals, organizations or even governments involved in terrorism. Yet who is considered a terrorist depends to a large extent on one's perspective, and this becomes clear in the depiction of terrorists by different people or organizations. An example is the portrayal of Al-Qaeda by various governments around the world as a centralized enemy with an organizational and operational hierarchy. It is difficult for some people to understand that Al-Qaeda is most likely nothing like that, and is actually more of a diffuse and decentralized network (Pillar, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Anthropologists try to carry out research from an emic perspective. This means that the researcher pays attention to the point of view and perceptions of the people being studied. In order to understand other people, their opinions and actions, it is important to consider their perspectives, because many different people in the world account for a myriad of perspectives. The use of terrorist violence is inexcusable and horrendous, yet, the fact that it is a cry for attention means there are underlying causes that need to be addressed. Finding out what those causes are requires honest

consideration of conditions and circumstances that take into account the perspective of "the other." When people's actions are guided by limited definitions and perceptions, they may find it difficult to assess a situation from a wider perspective.

In this article, I have tried to illustrate the complexity involved in defining terrorism, and the variety of standpoints that could be used to do so. In order to provide a fair description, it is important to consider these different perspectives, and to respect them. In such a way, prejudiced perceptions may be prevented, corrected or overcome in ways that might be of help in the fight against terrorism.

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