ONE

The Nature of Terrorism

This chapter introduces the subject of terrorism, considers prevailing definitions of the term and the manifestations of terrorism, describes basic typologies of terrorism, and distinguishes terrorism from crime and war. Its primary purpose is to clarify fundamental principles, concepts, and terms and thus set a foundation for understanding the material in the rest of the book.

A. Introduction

One of the clichés of our time is that the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, changed our world. That it is a cliché does not diminish its truth. In a single day, individuals operating in four small teams, outside the authority of any state, revealed themselves able to organize and inflict damage on civilians on a scale and in a manner that shocked the vast majority of both the general public and responsible authorities. They attacked noncombatants, young and old, male and female, and people of all major religious denominations. They exploited the vulnerability of an open, free, and bountiful society. The offenders had been operating under the radar, not closely followed. As suicide murderers, it was impossible to bring them to justice through conventional avenues. The event was unprecedented; it stunned people the world over.

Cliché or not, the event did produce monumental changes in our interconnected world. Security became much more extensive at airports at home and abroad, imposing time delays and inconvenience costs on millions of people everywhere. Fear of terrorism and enmity toward Muslims grew substantially as the media became preoccupied with stories of terrorist activities

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and threats of fringe extremists, both real and imagined. Economies and global markets were seriously shaken everywhere by threats of severe disruption to an international economic network reliant on open borders, the free movement of people, and the instantaneous flow of goods under fragile just-in-time inventory distribution systems. The markets were disturbed no less by concerns about the prospect of sharp reductions in the future availability of energy supplies, particularly oil and gas. Major military actions were launched, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, both in the name of counterterrorism. The standing of the United States plummeted throughout the world in the years immediately following 9/11.

Prior to the 9/11 attack, scholars and public commentators had been writing that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991 and the ending of the Cold War, along with the rise of advanced information and communication technology, were bringing the world closer together. They had witnessed the creation of a global community and a movement away from hostile political ideologies, notions of mutually assured nuclear destruction, and alienation and toward global economic and cultural exchange – the essential elements of a more peaceful world. The events of 9/11 and its aftermath raised serious questions about this bright scenario. In the words of Francis Fukuyama (2002a),

> The September 11 attacks represent a desperate backlash against the modern world, which appears to be a speeding freight train to those unwilling to get onboard. But we need to look seriously at the challenge we face. For a movement that has the power to wreak immense damage on the modern world, even if it represents only a small number of people, raises real questions about the viability of our civilization. The existence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of virulently anti-American or anti-Western forces and their possible use has become a real threat. The key questions that Americans face as they proceed forward with this "war" on terrorism are how deep this fundamental challenge is, which sorts of allies it can recruit and what we must do to counter it.

These questions and challenges make it essential that ordinary citizens, students, scholars, and others operating in the public and private sectors acquaint themselves with a basic understanding of terrorism: its nature, causes, and consequences. Our actions as prospective voters, consumers, producers, and even bystanders can alter the course of these events. It is extremely important that we understand these matters, so that we can act more thoughtfully, aware of opportunities to remove the sources of terrorism and thus reduce its consequences. Let us begin with the basics.

B. Definitions and Typologies of Terrorism

We need first to understand the relevant basic terms that describe both how terrorism is a unique form of aggression and how it is distinguishable from

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other forms of aggression – especially, crime, war, and insurgency. It is essential also to consider different types of terrorism and the basic settings within which each type manifests.

1. Definitions

What is "terrorism"? Bruce Hoffman (1998) observes that standard dictionary definitions are unhelpful because they tend to be overly broad and tautological and are often outdated. He notes also a primary difficulty in defining the term: the meaning of terrorism has changed frequently and fairly substantially over the past 200 years.

Edmund Burke (1993) was among the first to use the term, which he invoked to describe Robespierre's "Reign of Terror," a strategy aimed at stifling opponents and controlling the masses after the French Revolution. Robespierre was the radical Jacobin leader of the new French government. He used terrifying means – tens of thousands were executed at the guillotine, and hundreds of thousands of others were shot or left to die in prisons – in the name of virtuous democratic ideals, as an instrument of social control by the state to restore order in a climate of anarchy. This somewhat positive connotation of terrorism remained largely until the 1930s, when the term became used to connote repression of the masses by totalitarian states, including Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalinist Russia.

The modern usage of the term, developed in the mid-twentieth century, regards terrorism as a tool of ethnic and religious fanatics to serve political ends, such as liberation from an alien occupying group, or simply to exact righteous vengeance against a group labeled as a threat or enemy. Citing research published by Schmid and Jongman in 1988, Hoffman (1998, p. 40) notes that, of 109 definitions of "terrorism," most include elements of violence or force (84%), psychological impacts (41%), victim-target differentiation (37%), and method of combat, strategy, or tactic (30%). He adds, "On one point, at least, everyone agrees: terrorism is a pejorative term" (p. 31).

Gus Martin (2006) refines these notions by observing that terrorism today is widely understood to involve loose, cell-based networks that wage politically motivated, asymmetric violence against "soft" targets – that is, civilian and administrative targets rather than military ones. He observes that use of the term is typically justified through extremist language – replete with intolerance, moral absolutes, broad conclusions, conspiratorial beliefs, and religious or mystical references – aimed at disturbing or eventually destroying a target group, if not an entire population.

International organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations have had considerable difficulty developing a consensus on the definition of terrorism (Saul, 2006). In 2005, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

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proposed a broadening of the official definition of terrorism, so that the UN could have a stronger mandate to intercede where needed. Under his redefinition of the word, terrorism encompasses any act intended "to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians." Some Arab countries took exception to this proposition. With the Palestinians in mind, they requested exemptions for those "resisting foreign occupation" ("Can Anyone Fix the U.N.?," 2005).

In the face of such difficulties, Jonathan White (2006, p. 4) offers a serviceable and concise definition, which he attributes to Brian Jenkins: "the use or threatened use of force designed to bring about a political change." Others add that terrorism is a premeditated and unlawful act or threat, that it may be employed against human or property targets, that it usually targets noncombatant civilians, and that it involves the following: indiscriminate violence, an intention to achieve a political objective through intimidation, and elements of organization and planning to achieve a tactical objective or strategic goal (Coady, 2004; Crenshaw, 1983; Laqueur, 1987; Primoratz, 2004). Still others question whether terrorism requires a political agenda, arguing that it may be motivated by a compulsion to eradicate an objectionable group of people that is often based on an exclusivist religious rationale (L. Wright, 2006a).

The generic dictionary definition of "terror" is quite similar to that of "fear"; accordingly, we devote an entire chapter to the anatomy of fear (Chapter 10). The central role played by fear of acts of terrorism is significant and largely underappreciated. Understanding the role of fear deepens our understanding of terrorism, for terrorism is largely about the behavior of the at-large target population, of how it acts in the face of threats. This is an important concept because the seeds of solutions to the problem of terrorism may be found in considering that a target population may tend to behave in ways that immobilize itself, weaken its quality of life, and thus support the objectives of terrorists – and such self-destructive inclinations may be manageable. In many circumstances, interventions that aim to manage the public's fear of terrorism may be more effective than those that aim to strike back at the terrorists.

In any case, a precise definition of terrorism with which all authorities would be inclined to agree is elusive. Some definitions ignore threats, some focus on harms to human life and ignore property targets, and definitions vary as to what constitutes a noncombatant. A few definitions regard taxpayers who provide financial support for objectionable government acts as collaborators and legitimate targets. Some include acts of "ethnic cleansing" that are motivated strictly by hatred and lacking in any legitimate political objective; some exclude acts committed by sovereign states against their own people, regarding these as acts of tyranny rather than terrorism; and others

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add that terrorism requires an element of secrecy to ensure that the act shocks a target population.

A few authorities offer minimalist definitions to avoid these complexities. Sunil Khilnani (1993), for one, asserts that "terrorism is simply a tactic, a method of random violence." Igor Primoratz (2004) gives an even more austere characterization: "Only two things are clear: terrorism is a type of violence, and it is a bad thing, not something to be proud of or support." The problem with such definitions is that they are conceptually limited and offer little help to either policymakers and practitioners working to prevent and respond to the problem or to scholars working to test hypotheses about terrorism and thus understand its causes (Gibbs, 1989). Suicide bombings of subway riders are clearly distinguishable from other types of violence, such as barroom brawls and violent acts of emotionally disturbed people, and we would do well to examine more precisely what they have in common and how they differ.

Khilnani's point that terrorism is a tactic is one that can have profound implications for policy and politics. If terrorism is just a tactic, like an ambush or a sniping, rather than an ideology, as with most other "isms," then a political campaign to wage a "war on terrorism" may be doomed to failure, a rhetorical trick likely first to resonate with the public and then frustrate them over the longer term. As U.S. Marine General Wallace Gregson observes of the war on terrorism, "This is no more a war on terrorism than the Second World War was a war on submarines" (Packer, 2005).

Linguist Geoffrey Nunberg, in a 2001 essay heard on National Public Radio that is reprinted in Box 1.1, reiterates an important related point that has been made often: one person's "terrorist" is another's "freedom fighter." In a similar vein, Robert McNamara observes in the 2003 documentary film, *The Fog of War*, "Curtis LeMay said if we'd lost the war, we'd all be prosecuted as war criminals. . . . What makes it immoral if you lose, but not immoral if you win?" Although Nunberg does not attempt to resolve this question, he does make a critical point that echoes an element of Khilnani's minimalist definition: the distinguishing characteristic of terrorism is that it is an act of *indiscriminate* violence.

Recognizing these important nuances and the associated difficulties in relying on a one-size-fits-all definition of terrorism, the following definition is used in this textbook:

> Terrorism is the premeditated and unlawful use or threatened use of violence against a noncombatant population or target having symbolic significance, with the aim of either inducing political change through intimidation and destabilization or destroying a population identified as an enemy.

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Box 1.1. "Terrorism": The History of a Very Frightening Word

– Geoffrey Nunberg

A few weeks ago, the *Washington Post* disclosed that the global head of news for Reuters had written an internal memo asking reporters to avoid using the word "terrorist" to describe the airplane hijackers. As he explained, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." And Reuters dispatches have since avoided using the word "terrorism" unless quoting someone.

Given the circumstances, Reuters' scruples seem misplaced – there are times when even-handedness can tip over into moral abdication. But its policy actually goes back more than twenty years and reflects the equivocal history of the word itself.

"Terrorism" is one of those terms like "crusade," which began its life at a particular historical moment – in the case of the crusades, in 1095 when Pope Urban II asked Europeans to wrest the Holy Land from the Muslims.

In 1792, the Jacobins came to power in France and initiated what we call the Reign of Terror and what the French call simply La Terreur. The Jacobin leader, Maximilien F.M.I. de Robespierre, known to history by his surname, called terror "an emanation of virtue." In 1793, he said, "Terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible." In the months that followed, the severe and inflexible justice of the guillotine severed 12,000 heads, including Robespierre's.

Of course, not everyone shared Robespierre's enthusiasm for the purifying effects of terror. One of the first writers to use the word "terrorist" in English was Edmund Burke, that implacable enemy of the French Revolution, who wrote in 1795 of "those hell-hounds called terrorists [who] are let loose on the people."

For the next 150 years, the word "terrorism" led a double life – a justifiable political strategy to some, an abomination to others. The Russian revolutionaries who assassinated Czar Alexander II in 1881 used the word proudly. And in 1905, Jack London described terrorism as a powerful weapon in the hands of labor, though he warned against harming innocent people.

But for the press and most of the public, the word "terrorist" connoted bomb-throwing madmen. Politicians weren't above using the word as a brush to tar socialists and radicals of all stripes, whatever their views of violence. When President William McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist in 1901,

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Congress promptly passed legislation that barred known anarchists from entering the United States.

By the mid-twentieth century, terrorism was becoming associated more with movements of national liberation than with radical groups, and the word was starting to acquire its universal stigma.

One of the last groups willing to describe itself as terrorist was a Zionist organization called Lehi (Lohamei Herut Israel), known earlier as the Stern Gang. In 1946, when Palestine was still under a British mandate, Lehi terrorists killed ninety-one people, twenty-eight of them Britons, by planting a bomb in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

Most of the Third-World movements that resorted to political violence in the 1950s and 1960s preferred terms like "freedom fighters" or "guerrillas" or "mujahedeen."

"Terrorist" became a condemnation by the colonial powers. That's the point when news organizations started to become circumspect about using the word to describe groups like the Irish Republican Army, the Ulster Defense Association, or the African National Congress. It seemed to be picking sides, and perhaps a little imprudent – particularly when you consider that former "terrorists" like Nelson Mandela and Menachem Begin ended their careers as winners of the Nobel Peace Prize.

By the 1980s, "terrorism" was being applied to all manner of political violence. There was a flap over the word in 1989 when *New York Times* editor A. M. Rosenthal attacked Christopher Hitchens for refusing to describe the fatwah against Salmon Rushdie as terrorism. Hitchens had a good point. The fatwah may have been repugnant, but it was far from an act of indiscriminate violence – more like state-sponsored contract killing. But by then the word had acquired a kind of talismanic force – as if refusing to describe something as terrorism was the next thing to apologizing for it.

By the 1990s, people were crying terrorism whenever they discerned an attempt at intimidation or disruption. Hackers who concocted computer viruses were cyberterrorists, cult leaders were psychological terrorists. Software companies accused Microsoft of terrorism in its efforts to maintain its Windows monopoly, and Microsoft accused Apple Computer of "patent terrorism" after the companies got into a dispute over intellectual property. And when photographer Spencer Tunik got thirty people to lie down naked for a picture in front of the United Nations Building in New York, a critic described the piece as "artistic terrorism at its best."

With that kind of freewheeling precedent, it probably shouldn't have been surprising that the antiterrorism bill passed by Congress defined terrorism very broadly, so that a "terrorist offense" could include anything from hijacking an airplane to injuring government property, breaking into a government

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> computer for any reason, or hitting the secretary of agriculture with a pie. Civil libertarians are concerned that the notion of "terrorism" could become an all-purpose pretext, the way "racketeering" did after the passage of the RICO Act in the 1970s.
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> That would be a linguistic misfortune, too. Granted, it's natural to appropriate the language of violence when we want to dramatize our zeal or outrage – we make war on poverty, we skirmish over policy, and we cry bloody murder when the newspaper is late. But when things happen that merit the full force of our outrage, a legacy of careless usage can leave us at a loss for words.

2. Typologies

Given the virtually infinite variety of circumstances surrounding terrorist events, every group or act that fits any conventional definition of terrorism is unique, usually in several respects. Still, there are a few generic dimensions that distinguish some terrorists, terrorist groups, and terrorist acts from most others. Particular terrorist groups and individual acts of terrorism fall into any of a variety of categories, based on the following dimensions:

- Whether or not politically motivated
- Whether or not operating under state authority
- Degree of association with larger terrorist organizations or networks
- Extent of organization and planning
- Whether justified in religious or ethnic terms
- Whether aimed primarily at people or at symbolic targets
- The types of people targeted

Each case can usually be characterized conveniently and usefully in terms of the particular combination of these and possibly other dimensions that fit. The variation of behaviors among these various categories may in most instances be greater than the variation of behaviors within a particular category. Let us consider each of these dimensions more carefully.

Politically and Nonpolitically Motivated Terrorism

Acts of terrorism are generally carried out with a political agenda: to induce the state or citizens in a state to act in ways that those who carry out the acts perceive are unattainable through legitimate means. Typically, a terrorist act achieves its aim by instilling fear in a target group and thereby pressuring the state to act in accordance with the wishes of the terrorists. It may aim

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to destabilize the political, economic, or social order. It may attack symbolic targets, such as government buildings, a venerable statues (e.g., those of Buddha in Bamiyan, Afghanistan), or a sacred shrine – a mosque, temple, or church – rather than people.

In some cases, however, the acts of terror are committed out of sheer hatred, strictly with the goal of exterminating a group of people perceived as undesirable – referred to euphemistically as "ethnic cleansing" by the perpetrators and as "genocide" by objective observers – or inducing the targeted group to flee the territory. Gus Martin refers to these acts as cases of "communal terrorism" (2006, p. 171). Such acts are not generally characterized as politically motivated, although principled political motives may be claimed to provide an element of legitimacy to a terrorist cause that is rooted, in fact, primarily in hatred.

Terrorism by the State

We have noted that the term "terrorism" was coined in the nineteenth century to describe acts conducted by the French Republic. More than a century later, some of the most devastating episodes of terrorism continue to be committed by or sponsored under the authority of sovereign nations. Among the most brutal examples are the following:

- The Khmer Rouge killing of nearly two million Cambodians under the dictatorship of Pol Pot in the late 1970s
- The Baathist Army gassing of thousands of Kurds in Northern Iraq by Saddam Hussein in 1988
- The Serbian killing of several thousand Muslims in Bosnia under Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s

These three are all examples of state-sponsored acts of terrorism that were ordered directly and monitored closely by the leaders who sanctioned them.

In other instances, the acts are carried out more along the lines of patronage or assistance than direct control. Iranian support for Hezbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and terrorist activities in Iraq and elsewhere throughout the Middle East and other parts of the world all exemplify the patronage model of state-sponsored terrorism. Cuba is also known to have supported terrorist activities in South America and Spain, and Pakistan is known to have supported such activities in Kashmir. Support of a prolonged insurgency against communists by the United States and Britain during the Cold War also qualifies. The support can range from ideological encouragement and indoctrination to training and assistance in insurgency, intelligence, operational support in the form of providing false documents and safe havens, and financial rewards to the families of suicide bombers.

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These various forms of support may have any one or a combination of several aims:

- To destabilize a state to gain greater influence in the region
- To create international visibility for a persistent problem, such as that of Palestine
- To retaliate against a target state in the region perceived as an enemy
- To undermine the influence of a larger power operating in the region

Although acts of state-sponsored terrorism are well known – both those involving direct initiation and control and those involving patronage and indirect support – few sovereign nations officially acknowledge involvement in or support of these activities. Today, terrorism is widely thought to originate with groups like al Qaeda, operating outside the official auspices of the state. Constitutional democracies have taken particularly strong stands against terrorist attacks on noncombatants, especially in the post-Cold War era. Leaders of nondemocratic nations generally express opposition to terrorist activities as well, especially when the targets of those activities are people who are friends of the state or when the activities are aimed directly against the state and its resources. Although some nations provide covert support to terrorist groups and activities, typically indirectly through intermediaries to obfuscate their involvement, none officially acknowledge support of terrorism.

Connection to Larger Networks and the Extent of Internal Organization

Terrorist groups and individuals are, at one extreme, operatives of larger terrorist networks, much like business franchises. Some are only loosely affiliated – al Qaeda is the best known of such loosely associated networks. At the other extreme, terrorists act as independent lone-wolf operatives, such as "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski, Austrian letter bomber Franz Fuchs, and abortion clinic and Atlanta Olympic Park bomber Eric Rudolph. Larger, more connected groups can benefit by taking advantage of teamwork, division of labor, and power in numbers, but they tend to be subject to a greater risk of detection because their exposure is increased with each additional individual involved. Of course, even individuals must plan their attacks if they wish to enhance the prospects for success, but the need for planning and coordinating activities increases as the operations become more complex and the number of individuals needed to carry out the act or acts increases. The effectiveness of the group can be enhanced through practice, preparation, and secrecy, as in the cases of 9/11 and the London subway attack of 2005, but any group is generally only as effective as the competence of its weakest member.

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