

CHAPTER 1

The Shifting Definition of Terrorism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain the reason terrorism is difficult to define.
- Summarize the impact of context on definitions of terrorism.
- Explain the importance of defining terrorism.
- Outline contemporary attempts to define terrorism.
- Explain where the term *terrorism* originated and how the meaning changed during the history of the nineteenth century.
- Explain how socialism, anarchism, and communism were mistakenly associated with terrorism.
- Summarize the differing meanings of terrorism in Russia from the People's Will through the rise of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin.
- Summarize the early history of the Irish Republican Army.
- Define the term *selective terrorism* as used by Michael Collins.



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During World War II, soldiers on several fronts often executed prisoners. It was a routine event on the Eastern Front, and Japanese and Americans killed captives on Guadalcanal. German SS troops executed more than 200 American captives during the Battle of the Bulge. We may call these actions murder today, but few people would use the term *terrorism* to describe them.

In the summer of 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) (also known as the Islamic State, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIL, and Daesh) released videos showing the beheading of American and British hostages. ISIS also filmed mass executions of Iraqi military prisoners. Most of the world's leaders called these murders, and American political leaders frequently refer to ISIS as a terrorist nation/state.

The difference between these two examples might cause heated and passionate debate because terrorism is difficult to define. Both of these actions involved a form of terror, but the term *terrorism* is applied selectively. In addition, the meaning of *terrorism* changes over time. The term was originally used to describe the actions of the French government. It would be

applied to groups fighting against capitalism a few decades later and would be employed to describe both Russian revolutionaries and eventually the Soviet government. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the term became synonymous with nationalistic, revolutionary, radical religious, and nihilist groups.

Defining the term is not an academic exercise. The definition helps to determine policy, behavior, and international opinion. It becomes part of a nation's application of military force and its criminal justice system. Defining terrorism can literally be a matter of life and death. This chapter will focus on the problems of defining terrorism and offer a brief history of its shifting meaning.

Difficulties with Definitions

Terrorism is difficult to define because it is not a physical entity that has dimensions to be measured, weighed, and analyzed. It is a social construct; that is, terrorism is defined by different people within shifting social and political realities (Schmid, 1992). The term has spawned heated debate because it is nebulous and pejorative. As a result, there are many definitions of terrorism and no single accepted understanding.

Some scholars have opted for a simple definition stating that terrorism is an act or threatened act of violence against innocent people for political purposes (Laqueur, 1987, 1999). Some nations have criminalized terrorism, defining it as a violation of law (Mullendore and White, 1996). Alex Schmid tries to synthesize various positions in an academic consensus definition (see Schmid and Jongman, 2005, pp. 1–38, 70–111). Schmid says most definitions of the term have two characteristics: (1) someone is terrorized and (2) the meaning of the term is derived from the terrorists' targets and victims. Many victims of government violence claim that repression is terrorism, while governments tend to define terrorism as subnational violent political opposition (Bady, 2003). There is no standard meaning of the term *terrorism*.

H. H. A. Cooper (1976, 1977b, 1978, 2001) first approached the problem by stating that there is "a problem in the problem definition." We can agree that terrorism is a problem, but we cannot agree on what terrorism is.

Definitions Influenced by Social Context

The social context surrounding the term *terrorism* influences how it is defined. Consider the following examples and the differing meanings of *terrorism*:

- A. In early 2010, a colleague of mine returned from the U.S. State Department's Anti-Terrorism Assistance program in Jordan. He was working with 27 Jordanian police officers—12 Christians, 12 Muslims (all Sunnis), and three agnostics. They never argued about religion, but they were appalled when he outlined the operational methods of Hezbollah. The reason: The Jordanian police officers vehemently stated that Hezbollah was not a terrorist organization. It was a militia fighting the Israeli Defense Forces. Hezbollah is a Shi'ite group, but that made no difference to the Sunni Muslim, Christian, and agnostic police officers. In their minds, Hezbollah was a legitimate militia resisting Israeli aggression.
- B. In January 2015, three men claiming to belong to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and influenced by ISIS attacked the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine based in Paris. They murdered 13 cartoonists who had satirized Islam and then killed two police officers. They would murder four more people before they were killed a few days later. Every government in the

social construct: The way people view reality. Groups construct a framework around a concept, defining various aspects of their lives through the meanings they attribute to the construct.

academic consensus definition: A complex definition based on the work of Alex Schmid. It combines common elements of the definitions used by leading scholars in the field of terrorism.

social context: As used in this book, the historical, political, and criminological circumstances at a given point in time. It is the way people in a culture define actions and issues within a society's general outlook on reality. The social context affects the way terrorism is defined.

West and most governments around the world called this terrorism. More than 1 million people and 40 world leaders marched through Paris to show solidarity against terrorism. Yet, one Islamic leader asked why the world made so much ado over the deaths of 17 people when hundreds of Muslims were being killed around the world every day. He said Western deaths were considered to be the result of terrorism, but Muslim deaths passed unnoticed.

- C. The definition becomes even more complicated in war zones. In Afghanistan, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces are fighting two major enemies, a loose association of Central Asian fundamentalist Muslims called the Students, or the Taliban, and another terrorist group known as al Qaeda. News reporters, politicians, and military officers often lump the two organizations into a single group of terrorists, but there are profound differences. Al Qaeda operates as an international terrorist group, while the Taliban forms divergent regional militias and uses **selective terrorism** to support guerrilla operations. More important the theological tradition of the Taliban differs from al Qaeda's infatuation with a violent interpretation of a twentieth-century militant Egyptian theologian. Linking the two organizations under the single umbrella of terrorism results in a profound misunderstanding of the Afghan war (Christia and Semple, 2009).
- D. On November 5, 2009, Nidal Malik Hasan went on a shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 people. There were many reports that Hasan had embraced radical Islam and that he had decided to attack soldiers at Fort Hood as part of a global jihad against the West (Simpson and Gorman, 2009). A former high-ranking intelligence officer immediately called this an act of terrorism, yet many government officials stated that it was the act of a mentally deranged soldier (Sherwell and Spillius, 2009). In this case, even the country that had been victimized by murder seemed unable to decide on a definition of terrorism.
- E. There have been dozens of attacks by domestic right-wing extremists since a bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995. In addition, groups representing a violent interpretation of Christianity, anti-government groups, sovereign citizens, and members of the common-law court movement have killed more than 30 police officers in the past few years. When attacks against law enforcement officers occur, state, local, and federal authorities charge suspects with violations of statutory law. Neither the media nor the public routinely refer to those convicted of such crimes as terrorists, yet their actions are similar to attacks that are called *terrorism overseas*.

selective terrorism: A term used by Michael Collins during the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921). Collins did not launch indiscriminate terror attacks. Rather, he selectively targeted the British military, the police force it sponsored, and the people who supported the United Kingdom.

Nidal Malik Hasan: (b. 1970) an American soldier of Palestinian descent. Hasan was a U.S. Army psychiatrist who became self-radicalized and embraced militant Islam. In November 2009, he went on a shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 people and wounding almost three dozen others. He was wounded, arrested, and charged with several counts of murder.

The Importance of Defining Terrorism

Aside from the social context, the term *terrorism* is difficult to define because it is pejorative. It is loaded with politically explosive meanings. Therefore, the manner in which terrorism is defined has political consequences. Only nation-states have the freedom to apply the label to their enemies, and the term dehumanizes the people who receive the label. When people are deemed to be terrorists, governments give their security forces expanded powers of investigation, search, and detention. In many cases, they utilize military force to kill opponents without thought of capture or benefit of trial. For example, the United States has employed missile attacks from drones that not only kill terrorists but also destroy innocent civilians in the surrounding area. Terrorists are treated differently from criminals and other enemies of the state. They are atypical criminals entitled to neither human rights nor civil liberties. This is especially true when terrorists operate from foreign bases. Representatives of the



ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

State Repression

Edward Herman (1983) says terrorism should be defined in terms of state repression. During the Cold War, the United States supported several Latin American dictatorships because the dictatorships were anti-communist. These governments, which had some of the worst human rights records in history, routinely jailed, tortured, and executed political opponents. The United States not only ignored the repression, it also funded the activities and trained the repressive military

and police forces. When the amount of human suffering from these dictatorships is compared to violence caused by insurgent terrorism, the pain caused by modern terrorism shrinks to insignificance. The “real terror network,” Herman argues, is found in repressive government. University of Virginia sociologist Donald Black (2004) summarizes the paradox evident in Herman’s earlier work. Counterterrorism, he says, is more violent than terrorism.