

Definitions of Terrorism¹

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To come up with a definition of terrorism capturing all and only those cases commonly called “terrorist” would seem at first glance a hopeless task². It has been more than twenty five years since Walter Laqueur, a historian of terrorism, complained: “[...] recently, the term “terrorism” (like “guerilla”) has been used in so many different senses as to become almost meaningless, covering almost any, and not necessarily political, act of violence.” (Laqueur 2001: 6). Still, in my view, even if it were indeed impossible to find a perfect definition of terrorism³, it is important to search for it. There are at least two goals one might achieve: (i) one can come up with more than one *distinct* but *interrelated* definition and this in turn helps to *elucidate* how the word has been ordinarily employed; (ii) one of the definitions can prove to be particularly useful.

Concerning the first goal, I shall argue that there are three basic notions of terrorism which people employ in common discourses. First, there is the most general one, which corresponds to the etymology of the word and which equates terrorism with any advancement of intense fear (part 1). Then, there is the less general notion, which is linked to the first historical occurrence of the word and which captures both state and individual use of violence in politics (part 2). Finally, there is the most specific notion, on which I shall focus and which I call *terrorism in a proper sense* (part 3).

With respect to the second goal I shall argue that the notion of *terrorism in a proper sense* is the one which should be adopted in legal, media, and scholarly contexts. This notion I explicate and defend by way of defining a terrorist *act* (part 3). My thesis is that there are three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an act to be appropriately called “terrorist”: (1) it is committed by an individual or a group of individuals privately, i.e. without legitimate political authority of a recognized state; (2) it is directed indiscriminately against non-combatants; (3) the goal of it is to achieve something politically relevant by means of fear-provoking violence.

Let us turn now to the first section of my paper which deals with the most general notion of terrorism based on the etymology of the word.

(1) Terrorism in the broadest sense: etymology of “terrorism”

The English word “terrorism”, similarly as the equivalents of this word in most Indo-European languages, consists of the root “terror” and the suffix “-ism”. “Terror” was adopted into medieval English from Latin via medieval French and in its basic meaning it refers to a state

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² That it is impossible to define terrorism seems to be a widespread view. Haig Khatchadourian, for instance, writes: “[A]n *adequate essentialist* definition of what is now usually called terrorism appears to me to be impossible as well as undesirable. Rather, a “range definition” delimiting a certain kind of “family” concept would avoid the two opposite problems plaguing essentialist definitions or concepts in such cases: narrowness and overinclusiveness.” (Khatchadourian 1998: 10)

³ I.e. the one which matches exactly the past and present usage of the word in various forms of discourse (common life, media, scholarly works, etc.).

of intense fear. The role of the suffix “-ism” can be best described, in the following way: X-ism is a systematic activity aiming to promote and advance X. Thus, for instance, communism strives to establish ‘communities’, Kantianism promotes Kant’s philosophy, nominalism proposes names as a solution to the problem of universals, etc. Consequently, on the basis of its etymology, one can say that “terrorism” means a systematic advancement of intense fear (i.e. terror).

However, fear is not something which can be used in the same way as a hammer or a knife. Fear, roughly speaking, is an affective response to a pending state of affairs which one wants *not* to occur⁴. In order to get this response, one has to apply *fear-provoking means*. Since one of the main (if not the sole) means for provoking fear is violence (or threat to use violence), this is what I propose as the definition of terrorism in the broadest sense⁵:

DEF. 1: Terrorism in the broadest sense is *a systematic use of fear-provoking violence*.

(2) Political terrorism: the first occurrence of “terrorism”

Modern usage of the word “terrorism” can be traced back at least to 1795 (Laqueur 2001: 6). Edmund Burke (1729-1797) is reported to have been the first person to use this word in English, in order to warn people against “those thousands of hell hounds called terrorists”. Burke adopted the word from French, where it was used at that time to refer to a particularly bloody period of the French Revolution (March 1793 till July 1794). The basic meaning of the word was “the reign of fear”. In 1798 the word appeared as an entry in the supplement of the *Dictionnaire* of the *Académie Française* where it was defined as “système, régime de la terreur”

Let me spell out three somewhat speculative observations about the meaning given to the word by the *Académie Française*. First, it must have been clear to any native speaker of French that in “système, régime de la terreur,” fear and dread play a prominent role. In this respect, the definition of the *Académie Française* is to be taken more or less as equivalent to terrorism in the broadest sense. Second, the context (“régime,” the French Revolution, etc.) indicates that the goals pursued are of a political nature. Consequently, the definition of *Académie Française* becomes more specific than the definition of terrorism in its broadest sense since the latter does not include political goals among its conditions. Finally, there seems to be a hint of another condition, namely that the terrorist activity is carried out by non-private individuals (thus, “system” or “régime”). Presumably, these individuals were, or aspired to become, legitimate rulers of a recognized state⁶. Given that, it appears that the definition of *Académie Française* aims at defining what is known today as state-terrorism⁷.

Inspired by the preceding considerations I would like to formulate the following definitions of terrorism, which capture other, more specific uses of the word “terrorism.”

DEF. 2: Terrorism in a narrow sense is: the systematic use of fear-provoking violence, perpetrated

⁴ Taking avail of J.L Austin’s terminology one could say that to advance fear is a *perlocutionary effect* triggered by an act of violence. (Searle 1969: 25).

⁵ Naturally, there exists also metaphorical uses of “terrorism”. I witnessed, for instance, parents that called their children “terrorists”. The meaning of their expression was “our children annoy so frequently and unexpectedly that one fears what comes next”. These uses, however, we can leave aside.

⁶ Though at that time there was no consensus about what the conditions for the inter-state recognition are.

⁷ It should more appropriately be called “state-sponsored terrorism.”

either by a recognized state or by private individuals, in order to achieve political goals.

After dealing with the etymology and origin of the word “terrorism,” we shall turn our attention to what I call “terrorism in a proper sense”.

(3) Terrorism in a proper sense: three conditions of a terrorist act

The notion of terrorism in a proper sense I take to be less fundamental than the notion of terrorist act. The reason is that some terrorist organizations are not effective only as terrorist organizations and some non-terrorist organizations may commit a terrorist act⁸. Here are some examples which illustrate the usefulness of taking the notion of a terrorist act to be more fundamental than that of terrorism (terrorist organization): (a) Police forces of Guatemala engaging in off duty acts of violence against random civilians commit terrorist acts though they are not *qua* police force a *terrorist organization*. (b) Also, if the primary goal of al-Qaida were to feed the poor and it only once happened that an al-Qaida member blew an expensive restaurant (Pétrus), we could say with our distinction in mind that al-Qaida is not a *terrorist* but a humanitarian organization, whose member committed a *terrorist act*. (c) IRA and ETA sometimes act as *terrorist organization* - when attacking civilian targets, sometimes as *rebel groups* - when attacking military targets.

Now, that there are three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of a terrorist act⁹. The first condition concerns the actor, the second the target and the third the character of the act (i.e. goals and means):

DEF. 3: An act is a *terrorist act* if and only if (1) it is committed by an individual or group of individuals privately, i.e. without a legitimate authority of a recognized state; (2) it is directed indiscriminately against non-combatants; (3) the goal of it is to achieve something politically relevant by means of fear-provoking violence¹⁰.

In what follows I will discuss and defend each of the proposed necessary conditions in particular.

CONDITON 1 (Actors of terrorism): a terrorist act is committed by an individual or group of individuals when they act privately, i.e. without a legitimate authority of a recognized state.

⁸ I was also pondering whether a non-terrorist may commit a terrorist act (that the terrorists perform non-terrorist acts is naturally uncontroversial) similarly as a non-teacher can teach for once or non-driver drive. However, it seems that our intuitions do not admit of one-time-lapsed-terrorists. The reason I see in the moral seriousness of the act in question. If, for instance, Mr. Black steals a relatively unimportant thing and he never does that again, we would be hesitant to call him a “thief”. In contrast, if he intentionally kills (and it can be only one person) we say that he is a murderer. *Per analogiam*, anybody who carries out at least one terrorist act (or have done so in the past) is a terrorist.

⁹ The original inspiration for this definition has been Simpson (2001).

¹⁰ On the basis of this notion, other notion such as terrorism, terrorist organization and terrorist can easily be defined: DEF. (terrorism in a proper sense): terrorism is a feature in virtue of which an act is qualified to be a *terrorist act*. DEF. (terrorist organization): terrorist organization is the organizations whose primary function is to carry out terrorist acts. DEF. (terrorist): terrorists as those who have carried a terrorist act and/or are active members of a terrorist organization.

This condition concerns the question “Which type(s) of agents can perform a terrorist act?” Several answers have been proposed to this question: (a) state-like organizations only, (b) individuals or groups of individuals regardless of whether they act privately or as representatives of a state, (c) groups of individuals when acting privately, (d) individuals or groups of individuals when acting privately. I consider (d) to be the correct answer and so in what follows I shall refute (a) through (c).

Answer (a) seems to be the one assumed by the *Académie Française* in 1798 when characterizing terrorism as the “system or regime of terror”. I do not think that anybody would accept this answer today since most of the contemporary paradigmatic cases of terrorism are not carried out by state-like organizations. The reason why *Académie Française* did was due to the very limited and specific experience of the French people with the fear-provoking violence of the French revolution.

Answers (b) through (d) rely on the distinction between acting *privately* and acting *as a representative of a state* so let me first illuminate this distinction. “Acting privately” means acting without a legitimate authority of a recognized state, while “acting as a representative of a state” means acting *with* such authority. *Authority* in this (political) context can be characterized as a mission to represent in words and deeds those who are to be represented. *Legitimate* authority is the authority to which the represented consent¹¹, e.g. U.S. government and its employees, Osama bin Laden with respect to al-Qaida etc. *Illegitimate* authority is the authority which has been usurped and/or is only putative, e.g. Morocco with respect to the people in Western Sahara or Osama bin Laden with respect to the majority of Muslims. *State* is a geo-political unit created by the wills and minds of the people who are governed by common laws and reside in a determined territory. *Recognized* state is the one which the representatives of other states acknowledge to be a state. Examples of recognized states are well-known – they are drawn in common maps. The status of non-recognized states (or potential states) is a complicated one and it varies from case to case. Examples include: Palestine, Kurdistan, West Sahara, Tibet, Taiwan, Chechnya etc.

Having expounded the distinction between *acting privately* and *as a representative of a state* we come back to the question: “Which type(s) of agents can perform a terrorist act?”. Answer (b) suggests the view that states can perform terrorist acts (since representatives of a state perform them). This view is appealing in at least two ways. First, as I have pointed out, “terrorism” meant originally something akin to what is called “state-terrorism” today. Second, representatives of various states such as Mao’s China or Pol Pot’s Cambodia have killed far more people than individual non-governmental groups in a way which provoked much worse fear of brutality and capriciousness. However, one can reply to these. First, as I have said, the original use of the word “terrorism” was specifically tied to the French revolution – in a way that it is not nowadays. Second, the destructiveness seems irrelevant as to whether particular phenomena (Palestinian suicide bombings, plague, Pol Pot’s cleansing etc.) should be classified as terrorism or not. Moreover, there is also a further difficulty with (b). Let us recall that there is an essential difference in acting as a representative of a state or as a private person. Death penalty, tax collection, court convocation etc. – all these acts can be performed only by state representatives. To be sure, these acts are liable to moral evaluation and some individuals bear

¹¹ It would be difficult to specify this assertion closer. I certainly do not want to imply that the legitimate authority occurs only in democracies – it may occur in monarchies and even in dictatorships.

responsibility for them. However, when self-appointed individuals perpetrate these acts, the result is not death penalty but murder, not tax collection but burglary, not court convocation but theatre (though often with tragic ends). Similarly violent acts are of an essentially different nature when performed privately when done at the behest of the state. When state representatives lead war they can commit war crimes, when they oppress their own people they violate human rights but *qua* state representatives they cannot commit acts of terrorism. In contrast, private individuals *qua* private can never commit a war crime but only an act of terrorism. Consequently, one can reasonably conclude that it is more appropriate to say that state *sponsors* terrorism than that it actually *carries the terrorism out*. The phenomena referred to by the expression “state-terrorism” should rather be called “oppression” when directed to citizens/residents of the state and “war crimes” or “state-sponsored terrorism” when directed to others¹².

Finally, we come to (c) which states that the terrorist must be always a member of a group. Though this view might seem appealing since most of the terrorist acts have been indeed committed by members of a group, there are also some counterexamples: acts commonly referred to as terrorist which were committed by “soloists”. The best known case in the blow up of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols on April 2, 1995. These events are clearly instances of terrorism and there are no reasons I know of that should lead us to exclude them by definition.

Having clarified the first condition, we shall proceed to the second one.

Condition 2 (Targets of terrorism): a terrorist act is indiscriminately directed against non-combatants.

There are several views with respect to the question of who must be by definition the target of terrorist acts: (a) innocents, (b) civilian, (c) non-combatants. Let us deal with these options in turn.

(a) is problematic from at least two reasons. First, it is fairly unclear what innocence in this context would mean. Innocent of what? Second, it is unlikely that terrorists look for innocent people in order to kill them. They either consider the victims as *guilty* or else it is for them quite irrelevant whether they are innocent or not.

(b) is too restrictive since targeting non-civilians (soldiers, policemen etc.) when off-duty (on holidays, for instance) can be in most people’s opinion a terrorist act as well.

(c) I consider to be the correct answer: terrorists essentially attack those which are defenseless or are in a position in which they should not be attacked. This point has been described well by Rogier Trinquier (quotation from Schmid 1983: 81):

What characterizes modern terrorism, and makes for its basic strength, is the slaughter of generally defenseless persons. The terrorist operates within a familiar legal framework, while avoiding the ordinary risks taken by the common criminal, let alone soldiers on the field of battle, or even by partisans facing regular troops.

¹² Supporters of this claim: Barry Smith, Simpson (2001), U.S. Government etc., dissenters: Noam Chomsky, approvingly quoted by Henderson (2001: 5).

Noncombatants are not only civilians but also soldiers not engaged in war. This is why the attack by a suicide boat on the U.S. Navy destroyer Cole (Aden harbor, Yemen, October 12, 2000) should be classified as an act of terrorism. The crew of the destroyer was not at war but tanking fuel in a time of peace and was harbored in Yemen, which is a friendly country.

Condition 3 (Goals and means of terrorism): the goal of a terrorist act it is to achieve some politically relevant goals by means of the fear-provoking violence.

Through his industrious work, having assessed more than a hundred of definitions of terrorism, Alex P. Schmid proposes the following elaborate definition.

Terrorism is a method of combat in which random or symbolic victims serve as instrumental target of violence. These instrumental victims share group or class characteristics which form the basis for their selection for victimization. Through previous use of violence or the credible threat of violence other members of that group or class are put in a state of chronic fear (terror). This group or class, whose members' sense of security is purposively undermined, is the target of terror. The victimization of the target of violence is considered extranormal by most observers from witnessing audience on the basis of its atrocity; the time (e.g. peacetime) or place (not a battlefield) of victimization or the disregard for rules of combat accepted in conventional warfare. The norm violation creates an attentive audience beyond the target of terror; sectors of this audience might in turn form the main object of manipulation. The purpose of this indirect method of combat is either to immobilize the target of terror in order to produce disorientation and/or compliance, or to mobilize secondary targets of demands (e.g. a government) or targets of attention (e.g. public opinion) to changes of attitude or behavior favoring the short or long-term interests of the users of this method of combat. (1983: 96-99)

Though Schmid's definition is interesting and rich in detail, there are a few difficulties with it. First, the definition is rather lengthy and insufficiently concise, which is a point that Schmid himself seems to acknowledge (ibid.). Second, the definition contains an implicit element which should be made explicit, namely that the targeted victims are noncombatants¹³. Thirdly, the definition misses what I consider to be an essential element of a terrorist act, namely that it must be carried out privately (as I have argued, individual and state terrorism is essentially different and therefore should be kept separate). Finally, the definition contains many explicit elements that could and in fact should be left implicit. In fact, it engenders a whole *theory* of terrorism. In his definition Schmid carefully describes how the state of chronic fear (terror) is provoked ("victims share group or class characteristics which form the basis for their selection for victimization" etc.) and what specific means the terrorists use (atrocity, peacetime, disregard for conventional rules etc.). Schmid is especially elaborate in distinguishing four groups involved in terrorism (target of violence, target of terror, target of demands and target of attention) and how these are interrelated. However, though all of these details might be true, I do not think that it is either necessary or useful to include them into a *basic definition* of terrorism. It is not necessary since one can identify terrorism correctly even on the basis of a simpler definition and it is not useful since it precludes theories different from that of Schmid to work with the *same* definition (therefore making the communication between defenders of different

¹³ Schmid implies this point in his reference to extranormal features of victimization, i.e. peacetime, not a battlefield, which are for me the decisive factors that turn military persons into non-combatants. In another part of his book, Schmid even explicitly states: "Of the three terms utilized so far [civilian, innocent, noncombatant] noncombatant seems to fit best to describe the status of the terrorist victim." (1983: 82)

theories more difficult).

Instead of an elaborate description of the mechanics of terrorist activity (which is what a good *theory* of terrorism should aim at) I propose a simple condition: *the goal of a terrorist act is to achieve something politically relevant by means of a fear-provoking violence*. This condition concerns the goal and means of a terrorist act and together with my previous two conditions it is the last necessary and jointly sufficient condition of terrorism.

The expressions “politically relevant goal” and “means of a fear-provoking violence” are flexible as to what specific goals terrorists pursue and by using which means. Thus, terrorist acts are typically unexpected, random, brutal, clandestine, symbolic etc. Nearly always, terrorist acts intend to send a message and bring about a desired change, with the idea being that the best way to accomplish such change is to create sustained and intense fear on the part of those the message is intended for. Nevertheless, I do not think it necessary to specify these details in order to get a basic definition sufficient to determine which acts are terrorist and which are not.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to achieve two goals. The *first goal* has been to elucidate the ways people ordinarily use the word “terrorism”. I have distinguished three common notions of terrorism: the first notion equates terrorism with any use of fear-provoking means, the second with the use of these means in pursuing political goals, the third being what I call “terrorism in a proper sense”. The definition of this third notion fulfills the *second goal* of my paper – to define the notion of terrorism which would be particularly useful in contemporary political, scholarly and media contexts. This notion of terrorism in a proper sense I defined by using the notion of terrorist act: I argued that there are three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions of a terrorist act: (a) it is committed by an individual or a group of individuals privately; (b) it is directed indiscriminately against non-combatants; (c) the goal of it is to achieve something politically relevant by means of the fear-provoking violence.

Even if I succeeded in proposing a good definition (which matches our intuitions as to what is an instance of terrorism and what not)¹⁴ there still remains many questions e.g. as to the various details of what constitutes a typical terrorist technique, the morality of terrorism, development of the “philosophy of the bomb” etc. Interesting as these topics as they are, however, they would be a part of a comprehensive *theory* of terrorism and not of *definition* of “terrorism”¹⁵.

Bibliography:

¹⁴ Interestingly, my definition seems to accord with the definition used by the United States Government: “The term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence [= condition 3] perpetrated against noncombatant targets [= condition 2] by subnational groups or clandestine agents [= condition 1], usually intended to influence an audience [this is implied in my notion of fear in condition 3].” (22 U.S.C. 2656f(d)).

¹⁵ Concerning the morality of terrorism cf. e.g. Khatchadourian (1998), for the “philosophy of the bomb” cf. Laqueur (2002: 21-77). Paul Gilbert (1994) develops fairly comprehensive theory of terrorism but pays little attention to defining it (cf. esp. p. 7, where he seems to be satisfied with a quite simplistic definition: “terrorism [...] essentially means any method of war which consists in intentionally attacking those who ought not be attacked.”).

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