

Defining Terrorism

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The problem with defining terrorism is that terrorists and regular soldiers do many of the same things. Both a terrorist and a regular soldier at wartime use bombs, guns or other weapons to kill or otherwise harm people in the name of a higher cause. It, however, seems counterintuitive to say that a terrorist and a regular soldier are the same.

Perhaps one of the first items one should include in defining a terrorist or terrorism is the intended target of an attack. Terrorists generally accept that the specific and explicit targeting of non-combatants is an acceptable or even favourable tactic. Here we will take 'non-combatant' to mean any individual who is unable to defend himself with force of arms. This would include anyone from an infant to an unarmed adult or a soldier sleeping in his bunk. In fact, a soldier shot in the back would also be considered a non-combatant. However, this would not include soldiers ambushed while on patrol or other such surprise attacks generally utilized in guerrilla warfare. There have been occasions when Western powers, which most would not classify as terrorists, have specifically targeted non-combatants for various reasons. However, these Western powers do not generally utilize this type of tactic and tend to avoid it. Therefore, it is not merely the specific targeting of non-combatants but the general acceptance and favouring of this *modus operandi* which is a necessary condition of terrorism.

Another item which certainly must be included in the definition of terrorism is the utilization and favouring of absolutely desperate measures such as suicide attacks. Though there are instances where regular soldiers have near certainty of their deaths and resort to desperate measures in an operation – take for example the first wave to storm the beaches at Normandy – it is not their specific and explicit intent to die in the process. A G.I. storming the beach wants to survive though the possibility of this might be slim. A terrorist, however, will likely be involved in an attack which explicitly and necessarily requires his death – for instance: piloting a plane into a building. It is not precisely the suicidal nature of the attack but the “by any means necessary” mentality of fanatical devotion to the cause over all else which characterizes the terrorist act. In other words, regular military organizations see the death of their own soldiers as a possibility which is generally to be avoided to the greatest extent possible while terrorist organizations readily and frequently implement tactics which necessitate the death of those carrying out the operation.

Yet another item which must be included in the definition of a terrorist act is its aim. Generally speaking, a terrorist act aims primarily at generating terror. The attack aims at striking the will of and generating fear in the target population in order to send some sort of political message. While regular military units have, upon occasion, committed such acts, generally they differ from terrorists in that they primarily strike targets of direct strategic value.

It should be added that a terrorist is always a member of a group. An individual acting alone is a criminal rather than a terrorist. Terrorists belong to organizations with specific aims; they are not lone gunmen. An individual can commit acts of terror but in

order to be a terrorist he must be working with a group of other people. The reason for this is that a terrorist organization is a political unit in itself, seeking some sort of change by any means necessary.

It seems then that one can define terrorism thusly: **X is a terrorist if and only if X is a member of a group characterized by the use or threat of potentially or actually deadly violence in which 1) the specific targeting of non-combatants, 2) the utilization of desperate tactics up to and including those which necessitate the death of those carrying out the attacks, and 3) the generation of terror for the purpose of sending a message which is political in nature are favoured and/or generally accepted practices.**