

A Definition of Terrorism

Short presentation

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To define what is a *terrorist organization* or who is a *terrorist* prior to what is a *terrorist act* seems to me a wrong start. Some terrorists do not act *just* as terrorists and some non-terrorists may commit a terrorist act. Here are the examples showing the usefulness of distinguishing terrorist act from terrorist organization: (a) The police forces of Guatemala engaging in off-duty acts of violence against random civilians commit terrorist acts though they are not *qua* the police force a *terrorist organization*. (b) Also, if the primary goal of al-Qaida would be to feed the poor and just once putting some bombs to Pétrus and Le Gavroche, we would classify al-Qaida not as a *terrorist organization* but as a humanitarian organization whose members committed a *terrorist act*. (c) IRA and ETA sometimes act as a *terrorist organization* - when attacking civilian targets, sometimes as a *rebel group* - when attacking military.

So, this is the definition of a terrorist act that I propose:

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 (potentially) 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.

Terrorism, then, is the feature in virtue of which an act is qualified to be a *terrorist act*. *Terrorists* as those who intend to carry out a terrorist act, or have done so in the past. *Terrorist organizations* are the organizations whose primary function is to promote terrorist acts.

On the basis of my definition of a terrorist act, some other species of violent acts can be schematically defined as follows:

rebellious and revolutionary acts - (1) may but need not hold, not (2), (3);
criminal acts - (1), (2), the means of (3) without the politically relevant goals;
acts of tyranny and state oppression - not (1), (2), (3) may but need not hold; [if in (2) the
 civilians are of an enemy's country the act in question is a war-crime]
brutal counter-rebellion acts - not (1), not (2), (3);
mad acts - (1), not (2), the means of (3) without the politically relevant goals