

Dylan Hall Defining 'Terrorist'

While the majority of world nations have agreed terrorists must be pursued and prosecuted, the act of agreeing on what a terrorist is has proven significantly more difficult. Nonetheless, the serious threat of terrorism demonstrated Sept. 11 mandates we carefully consider, what is a terrorist?

A terrorist is labeled thus from his or her actions. As a murderer is someone who has committed in part or wholly an act of murder, a terrorist is someone who has in part or wholly committed a terrorist act. What then is a terrorist act?

A terrorist act, like any human action, is understood and defined in the company of its intent. A murder is a deliberate killing, but the driver in a fatal car accident is guilty of only manslaughter. Similarly, whether an act is terrorism rests on intent and action.

Terrorist acts are committed with the goal of influencing governments to specific goals, whether political, ideological or religious. Some terrorists demand specific governments rescind control over specific bodies of land while others hope for the release of those they feel are wrongfully imprisoned.

While the overall goal of a terrorist act is to affect the government, it does so indirectly by first attacking the public. Violence and the threat of violence are used on the general citizenry, most often with the hope of instilling mass fear to best coerce political leaders. For this reason terrorist acts are most efficient when they are capable of instill the greatest public hysteria and generate large amounts of media coverage, such as mailing anthrax into homes and detonating explosives in highly populated urban areas.

More succinctly, terrorists and terrorist acts are:

Terrorist (n.): A person guilty of a terrorist act or acts.

Terrorist act (n.): The calculated use of violence against a citizenry by a sub-national group or individual with the goal to influence governmental policy in the favor of specific goals, whether political, ideological or religious.

X is a terrorist if and only if X passes the following 3 tests:

1. X uses premeditated violence against innocent citizenry.
2. X attempts to influence governmental policy.
3. X is not a nation state.

By this argument the Irish Republican Army is terrorist. The I.R.A. orchestrates the detonation of explosives in populated urban areas (1) in attempt to coerce Britain to relinquish reign of Northern Ireland (2) and is not a nation-state (3).

Similarly Al Qaeda passes this test for conducting complex attacks on the citizenry of New York City (1) in accompaniment of demands including the removal of American Military from Saudi Arabia (2) and is not a nation-state (3).

Timothy McVeigh also meets all three criteria for bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 people including 18 children (1) in protest to U.S. government actions including the Waco, Texas incident (2) and is not a nation-state (3).

Contrarily, a nation that accidentally kills the citizens of an enemy nation during a wartime bombing would not be a terrorist, failing all, but arguably passing the second test.

Furthermore, if an American group damaged equipment at a shipping yard in an attempt to influence U.S. government trade policies with China, they would not be guilty of terrorism because they would lack violence against citizenry.