

Why has Defining Terrorism Proved so Difficult?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/05/14/why-has-defining-terrorism-proved-so-difficult/>

LAURA CLARKE, MAY 14 2009

In a world where states are increasingly subject to the consequences of globalisation, national security has become an ever more important issue. No international phenomenon has demonstrated this necessity more than terrorism. Following the watershed attacks of 9/11, governments have found themselves confronted, not only with a need to implement protective policies against attacks, but also respond to the, often inflated and media-propelled, collective will and fear of the population. In formulating an effective counter-terrorist strategy, the construction of a universal definition of terrorism is needed. The subjectivity of the term, however, ensures that this is, by no means, an easy undertaking. As David Tucker summarises the task, 'Above the gates of hell is the warning that all that enter should abandon hope. Less dire but to the same effect is the warning given to those who try to define terrorism.'^[1]

The difficulty in assigning a truly comprehensive definition to terrorism lies in the fact that, not only is it challenging to be specific when motives, targets and methods differ so broadly from case-to-case, but the complexity of untangling the overlaps within each of these categories makes the task virtually impossible. Certainly, attempting to discuss all aspects included within the definition of terrorism is far too broad a feat for the scope of this essay.

In assessing the differences between definitions, it appears that the most disparity lies within the description of terrorist motivations. This disparity, alone, warrants study and yet the importance of focussing on the difficulty of defining the motivations of terrorists is more significant in its implications. It is vital to be comprehensive in the categorisation of motivations because the methods and targets selected by terrorists are often reflected by their purpose.

As previously asserted, definitions find their use in application. The definition of terrorism is vital as a means of fighting the terrorist threat, as well as serving as a guideline in the prosecutions of suspected terrorists. Understanding, and ultimately solving, the difficulties faced by those assessing the motivations of different terrorist groups, allows for a more thorough application of the definition of terrorism. Countering terrorism means predicting the methods used by groups and the likely targets; a truly thorough comprehension and definition of motivations would better serve this purpose. It is, therefore, the aim of this essay to address the differing purposes of terrorist groups, and understand the difficulty in categorisation of these purposes when faced with the task of creating a definition of terrorism.

In considering the difficulties of defining terrorism in terms of motivation, it is first necessary to examine existing definitions. For the most part, definitions appear to be divisible into two categories; those that offer merely 'politically-motivated' as a description of terrorist motivations, and those that attempt greater specificity.

The first category of definitions (those referring to all motivations as 'political') includes those offered by a number of academics including Jan Schreiber^[2], Paul Wilkinson^[3] and James and Brenda Lutz.^[4] Along a similar line was the definition created as a result of the study of 73 existing definitions of terrorism, that described the phenomenon as a 'politically motivated tactic.'^[5]

Although, for the sake of conciseness, the reduction of the varying motivations under the 'political' umbrella-term may be advantageous, allowing such a broad conception serves to ensure that the definition is useful neither as a guideline nor as a tool in counterterrorist strategy. In short, the application of a definition using 'political' as the only

Why has Defining Terrorism Proved so Difficult?

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category of motivation is extremely limited.

A number of definitions have attempted to recognise this problem by addressing, more specifically, the differing motivations of terrorist groups. The difficulty of defining terrorism, and particularly the motivations of terrorists, becomes clear, however, in the disparity experienced between definitions.

The US Army Command suggests that terrorism, 'may be motivated by political, religious or ideological objectives,'[6] and these categories of motivation are shared by the UK Terrorism Act (2000),[7] as well as the definition offered by the US Department of Defense.[8] The UN Resolution 1566 (2004) was diverse in its definition, indicating that terrorism is often justified on '[...] political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic [and] religious' grounds.[9] Alex Schmid, whose renowned study of 109 definitions of terrorism culminated in one of the most comprehensive definitions, frequently employed by other academics, suggests that terrorist motivations are 'idiosyncratic, criminal or political [...]'.[10]

The purpose of such a brief examination of existing terrorism definitions is to highlight the broad spectrum of labels given to terrorist motivations. Although, as Schmid suggested in his study, there appears to be some concurrence on the label of 'political' as a motive (68% of definitions studied included this term),[11] the vacillation throughout definitions suggests an implicit difficulty in separating and categorising motivations. It appears that, for many writers and political institutions, the solution is to use 'political' as a label encompassing all other possible terrorist purposes. As previously stated, however, this places a limitation on the definition. I shall therefore examine the difficulty in distinguishing between motivations, and determine whether it is truly possible to offer a definition of terrorism that is comprehensive with respect to motives, thus allowing for thorough applicability.

Since the attacks on the US in September 2001, the focus has undoubtedly been on terrorism as a force of religious fanaticism. Al Qaeda, as one of the more elusive religious terrorist groups, ultimately holds the goal of 'seeking the violent transformation of an irremediably sinful and unjust world.'[12] Indeed, Osama bin Laden, himself, refers to the murder of Westerners as 'an individual duty for every Muslim,'[13] perhaps employing the Quranic, 'Verse of the Sword.' The 'Verse of the Sword' is a passage invoked as a justification for jihad, assigning to all Muslims the right to utilise 'the sword' as a means of spreading Islam.[14]

To believe that religion alone serves as a motivation for Al Qaeda and other religious-fundamentalist groups, however, is to ignore the gap that often exists between motivation and justification. As is suggested by Khaled Abou El Fadl, 'the likes of bin Laden abuse religion to justify their actions [...]'[15] and, although religion undoubtedly plays a role in the ideological drive behind the terrorist actions of these groups, there are certain other motivations at play. Indeed, taking Al Qaeda as an example, politics and national concerns are not without a place in their aims. An issue of primary significance to Al Qaeda is the US occupation of Mecca and Medina, both holy places for Muslims, and the desire 'for their armies to move out of all lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.'[16]

It does well, however, to remember that terrorism as a result of religious fundamentalism also remains prevalent in religions other than Islam. White Supremacist groups, often propelled by Christian fundamentalism, exercise terrorist attacks throughout the West. Although offering a religious justification for their actions, attacks are often focussed on achieving particular political goals; the Phineas Priesthood, for example, exercised attacks on abortion clinics and their staff.[17] It therefore seems to be the case that one cannot, without a great deal of time and study, easily delineate the different motivations of religious terrorist groups. While often based on religious ideology, goals can diverge into the political as a means of achieving domination or political influence. Indeed, in his comprehensive examination of the definition of terrorism, Lord Carlile poses this question, 'can there be a religious cause which is neither political nor ideological?'[18]

Although the answer may appear to be that there is not, it must be considered whether the *motivation* of these groups stems beyond the religious. As Mark Juergensmeyer suggests, '[...] one cannot deny that the ideals and ideas of activists like bin Laden are authentically and thoroughly religious [...]'.[19] Certainly their goals may be political, but the ideology that finds its place in the origin of the group is religious; the motivating force is one of extremist religious ideology.

Why has Defining Terrorism Proved so Difficult?

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It is possible, however, to understand the difficulty in separating the motivations of religious terrorist groups. With Islamic terrorist groups, in particular, the task becomes more problematic; the Middle East experiences a merging of 'Church' and state that many Western nations attempt, at all costs, to avoid. It is, perhaps, this mix of politics and religion that makes religious extremism a more prevalent problem throughout the Middle East. In attempting to define terrorism, however, the interconnections of the political and the religious makes specifying motivation a particularly challenging task.

If one next considers terrorist groups deemed to be ideologically motivated, a similar set of difficulties present themselves. Marxist terror continues to be an issue throughout Latin America where 'insurgent and terrorist movements [...] continue to challenge the governments of the region.'^[20] Although indeed 'political' in broad terms, the motivation of extreme leftist and rightist groups is certainly ideological in origin. Groups that promote a specific political ideology, however, may also be labelled 'ethno-nationalist terrorists.' As is pointed out by Paul Wilkinson, 'These groups included the PFLP and DFLP, ETA, and PKK, all of which aimed not only to establish independent statehood for their own ethnic group but also to ensure that it was run on revolutionary socialist lines.'^[21]

Once again the difficulty of detangling motivations presents itself; it is possible that both ideology and ethno-nationalism go hand-in-hand. Certainly, in the case of the Nazi Party and the, still prevalent, Neo-Nazis, although founded on, and motivated by ideology, the purposes of the group are orchestrated in the form of ethnic hatred.^[22]

The difficulty in dealing with such a case comes in deciding which of these factors reflects the true motivation of the group, and indeed, whether posing the question in the first place is worthwhile. Do we claim that ideology, as the factor creating group cohesiveness, is the central motivation? If we are to accept this conclusion, then we surely present ourselves once again with the problem of using an umbrella-term. All terrorist groups may be deemed to come together in the name of an ideology, whether it be religious, political, ethnic or single-issue. But to bypass ideology entirely would surely be missing the point. An understanding of the group's ideology is central to comprehending their goals and, ultimately, predicting their behaviour.

The answer to this dilemma is, perhaps, one of subjective interest. However, what these considerations have succeeded in demonstrating is that to separate motivations and highlight the single significant purpose of a terrorist group is a near impossibility. What this does not mean, however, is that to assign 'political' as an encompassing label is a solution to the problem.

The purpose of this essay is not to argue that most terrorist groups remove themselves from the political realm, indeed it is quite clear that political goals and ideology have a place within almost all terrorist organisations. The argument I pose, however, is that the term 'political' loses all meaning if it is employed to cover the purposes of all terrorist groups. In light of the difficulties presented, using 'political' as an umbrella-term perhaps serves its purpose in a universal definition; it does not, however, allow for comprehensive application.

It is, therefore, perhaps time to abandon the quest for a universal definition of terrorism and consider whether this time would be better spent creating a series of definitions reflecting the differing motivations of terrorist groups. This would certainly supply leaders in counter-terrorism with a specific means of indicating purpose, and the ability to more accurately predict weapons, methods and targets, as well as overcoming the inherent difficulties in attempting a universal definition of terrorism.

The universal definition of terrorism, as it stands, holds little practical use, outside of serving as a broad summary of the phenomenon. Surely the concern of academics and policy-makers should lie in creating a set of definitions that reflect the variation between motivations and allow for the most effective means of fighting the terrorist threat.

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Why has Defining Terrorism Proved so Difficult?

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Why has Defining Terrorism Proved so Difficult?

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Date written: 2008