

One Person's Terrorist... Another Person's Freedom Fighter?

Written by Mareike Oldemeinen

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MAREIKE OLDEMEINEN, JAN 13 2010

'One Person's Terrorist is Another Person's Freedom Fighter' Does this Simple Characterisation Help us get Closer to a Definition of Terrorism?

The simple fact that there are over one-hundred definitions of terrorism in the world points to the problem as to how terrorism is to be defined. As a result, terrorism is subject to a lot of debate and study not only concerning its definition but also regarding its causes and ways of combating it. Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi and Daniel Vencill have come to terms with this difficulty by asking whether there actually can "be a true and correct definition of terrorism – an abstract concept with no real presence?"[1] If one then, however, tries to define terrorism, the commonly used phrase 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' will probably spring to mind. But there are several questions that have to be asked in relation to this truism and they will form the basis of this essay. First of all, it has been argued by scholars like Leonard Weinberg that this claim would be a confusion of "the goal with the activity"[2], rather than a guideline towards finding a universal definition. Also, there have been debates about the actual meanings of the words 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' and as to how far these could be used interchangeably. On the other hand, this work will point out that although maybe not wholly applicable, the truism is useful in some respect, as it draws attention to important issues that have to be considered when attempting to define the concept of terrorism.

A widely agreed problem concerning the phrase 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' is the apparent confusion between ends and means that it entails. Taking this characterisation for granted would mean that the concept of terrorism should primarily be defined according to its aims and not according to the means used to achieve those goals. However, when looking at current definitions of terrorism, it becomes apparent that they primarily focus on the motivations of the perpetrators and the methods used. Leonard Weinberg further highlights this by claiming that terrorism is a tactic and can hence be used for a number of purposes, be it to free a country from oppression or to generate fear (Weinberg, Leonard; *Global Terrorism*, 2009). Thus, it is not the end that justifies the means in this case, but rather it is important to base any definition of terrorism on the means employed to achieve whatever goal it is that a group or individual is fighting for.

Another difficulty arises from the language itself used in 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'. Although, as Louise Richardson suggests, most terrorists don't see themselves as such, but rather refer to themselves as 'freedom fighters' (Richardson, Louise; *What Terrorists Want*, 2006), it is, by definition, not possible to label one and the same person as a 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter'. Zagros Madjd-Sadjadi and Daniel Vencill have elaborated on this problem by saying that "freedom fighters use legitimate military methods to attack legitimate political targets. The actions can be legitimized when they have some possibility of winning the conflict. Terrorists fail to meet this legitimacy"[3] This emphasises that although it is possible for different individuals or states do have diverging opinions on any act of terrorism or freedom fighting, this does not hold for the search for a universal definition of terrorism and hence this greatly reduces the applicability of 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' to this quest. Former US President Ronald Reagan seemed also to suggest that this statement has limited applicability, as he said at a press conference in 1986 that

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[...] are people who deliberately choose as a target to murder and maim innocent people who have no influence upon the things that they think of as their political goals.”[4]

This statement also highlights the other problem that arises if a person is labelled as 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' at the same time, and that is the problem of response. As Jessica Stern has pointed out, “How we define terrorism profoundly influences how we respond to it.”[5] So, if a 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' are defined as the same person that could imply that the terrorist may escape prosecution under the cover of being called a 'freedom fighter', fighting for a just cause. Hence, overall it has been shown that the characterisation 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' is not only a confusion of the ends and means of any action, but also a contradiction in itself, as it tries to apply to completely different terms to one individual.

At the same time, however, it is precisely this contradiction that, although it might not help as such to find a definition of terrorism, still serves a vital purpose: that of drawing attention to the fact that when searching for a definition, it is important to include a distinction between legitimate freedom fighting and illegitimate acts of terrorism. Yasser Arafat in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in November 1974 has underlined the importance of including such a distinction when he argued that “The difference between the revolutionary and the terrorist lies in the reason for which each fights. For whoever stands by a just cause and fights for the freedom and liberation of his land [...] cannot possibly be called terrorist”[6] Interpreted in this way, the statement 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' also points to the differences among political cultures and religions that have to be taken into account when defining terrorism. Rik Coolsaet has pointed out here that “A Palestinian suicide bombing attack will be considered an act of terror in Israel whereas it will be hailed as an act of heroism in a large part of the Arab world.”[7] Thus, this statement shows that although the truism is not very useful when actually defining the concept of terrorism, it contributes to the thought-process that precedes this.

On the one hand, it has now been shown that, in general, “To suggest that 'freedom fighter' is an alternative to 'terrorist' is to confuse ends and means”[8] and that defining terrorism is primarily about the means used to achieve any kind of goal. On the other hand, as has been pointed out, the statement that 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' is not wholly useless. It serves the important purpose of drawing attention to two issues that have to be incorporated when trying to define the concept of terrorism. For one, it is vital to include some form of distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters and maybe even to include some form of definition for something that could be called 'justifiable terrorism'. Furthermore, when interpreted as a conflict between different viewpoints and opinions, the truism points to the need of an appreciation of political, cultural and religious differences among states regarding the interpretation of terrorism and hence the need for incorporation of this into a universal definition of terrorism.

First of all, when trying to find a universal definition of terrorism, it is useful to look at existing definitions from different political, cultural and religious backgrounds in order to get a broader picture of the current meaning and usage of the word. This is something that the phrase of 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' can be said to refer to, as the contradiction of someone being a 'terrorist' to one person and a 'freedom fighter' to another points to the obvious differences in opinions and perceptions of one and the same act, individual or group. Louise Richardson has identified seven of these common characteristics which most modern official definitions of terrorism share: it has to be politically inspired; it must be involving violence or the threat of violence; it is intended to communicate a message; the act and the victim carry symbolic significance; it is (usually) committed by a sub-state actor; the victim of the violence and the audience at which the message is directed are not the same and terrorism involves the deliberate targeting of civilians (Richardson, Louise; *What Terrorists Want*; 2006). However, when then trying to deduct a common, universal definition from this, those in charge of this task have to be careful not to “arrive at a definition based on (current) ordinary language”[9] and one has to be careful as to what one is trying to label or achieve by a universal definition of terrorism.

As Gus Martin points out, “Establishing formal definitions can, of course, be complicated by the perspectives of the participants in a terrorist incident, who instinctively differentiate freedom fighters from terrorists, regardless of formal definitions” and hence, particular attention must be paid not to fall into this pattern when formally defining terrorism. Thus, as has been shown, for the actual process of finding a definition, the truism 'one person's terrorist is another

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person's freedom fighter' is not very useful, as it mirrors only the subjective understanding of the individuals involved and represents a confusion of ends and means. When defining terrorism, this should be based on the means that an actor uses in order to achieve any goal – be it the liberation of his country or some other political or religious aim. It has also been demonstrated, that by definition, any act, individual or group cannot be a terrorist and a freedom fighter at the same time, as freedom fighters, according to former US President Reagan, “are fighting against organized military forces”[10] who are in some way related to the audience they're trying to reach, whereas terrorists are said to choose their victims at random and hence the victim and the audience are often not related. However, it has also been shown that, although the characterisation 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' might not be useful in the actual process of finding and establishing a definition of terrorism, it nevertheless does have some importance insofar as that it points to important considerations that have to be made before formally defining terrorism. The first here is that there is a need for a clear distinction between terrorists and freedom fighters in the definition and maybe even the inclusion of something resembling a definition for 'justifiable terrorism'. Secondly, the truism highlights the political, cultural and religious differences in understanding of the concept of terrorism that do exist and that have to be accounted for in any formal, universal definition of terrorism. Thus, overall, the simple characterisation 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter' does not as such help us get closer to a definition of terrorism, but it does emphasise some important concerns that must not be missed in any attempt at defining the issue.

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Written for: Prof Andrew Williams
Written at: University of St Andrew's
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