

The Delegitimizing Power of the 'Terrorism' Label

Written by Anais Chagankarian

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How Effective is the 'Terrorism' Label as a Form of Delegitimizing a Political Opponent?

Although the notion of terrorism existed before, since 11 September 2001 and the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, the term has been used everywhere to target all kinds of actors and groups throughout the media and in official speeches. The showing of the horrible images of the attack in which around 3,000 people were killed – in what was seen as the most powerful country of the world – led to an unprecedented feeling of insecurity and suspicion that rapidly spread all over the world. Terrorism is now one of the most pressing issues in governments' agendas, and its questioning has thus become controversial and 'taboo' (Bartolucci 2010: 120). A discipline however developed in the study of terrorism which took the name of Critical Terrorism Studies. Its primary goal is to 'put [the notion] under a critical analysis and [to scrutinise] the consequences of its use' (Bartolucci 2010: 121). As argued by Staun, "denoting a person or an organisation 'terrorist' is far from being an innocent affair" and many governments and actors have been using the term to refer to their political opponents for their own interests (2010: 410). Such is the case, for example, in Turkey and Morocco, where the governments have been referring to the separatist groups of their countries (PKK in Turkey and Polisario Front in Morocco) as 'terrorists', although this labelling has raised debates. It thus becomes relevant to ask the question, how effective is the 'terrorism' label as a form of delegitimizing a political opponent? According to the definitions of the Cambridge dictionary, a label is 'a word or a phrase which is used to describe the characteristics or qualities of people, activities or things, often in a way that is unfair' and delegitimizing refers to making something illegal or unacceptable. Consequently, the question implies that the terrorism label could be used deliberately for political purposes. This essay will thus try to answer this question focusing on the characteristics of the term 'terrorism' and the impact of its use in politics. It will show that the terrorist label is a very strong strategic tool to delegitimize political opponents, but it will also explore some conditions for the strategy to be fully effective.

One of the most striking aspects of the study of terrorism is that there is actually no commonly agreed definition of what terrorism is. Many scholars have come up with their own definitions of the term but it has been impossible to reach a consensus to define terrorism internationally. Because of the lack of common understanding of what terrorism is, there is no possibility to objectively identify the phenomenon and question some actors' use of the term. This has given governments and political actors in general the ability to use the word 'terrorism' very freely, even 'promiscuously' (Jenkins 1980: 1). As explained by Staun, terrorism is not objective in the sense that nothing can be terrorism 'in itself' (2010: 411). Actions and groups become 'terrorists' when it has been seen judicious to label them as such, out of all of the other alternative terms that were available. As stated by Valentina Bartolucci, 'framing an event as terrorism is not a natural act, non it is neutral, and alternative framings are always possible' (2010: 119). Consequently, the term is not even subjective (as it is not relative to a personal belief or interpretation) but 'inter-subjective and inherently political and institutionalised' since actors have been deliberately using the term as a way of reaching political interests (Staun 2010: 411). Hence the reason why the literature on terrorism refers to a terrorist 'rhetoric', which Cambridge dictionaries define as a 'speech or writing which is intended to be effective and influence people'. The terrorist rhetoric is thus appreciated for the impact it can have on the audience and has reached a discursive value. As explained by many scholars, it has been used to target political opponents. Jenkins, for example, states that 'some governments are prone to label as terrorism all violent acts committed by their political opponents' (1980: 1) whereas Kapitan explicitly asserts that the aim is to discredit those who are targeted by this rhetoric (2003: 7).

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A reason for this is that, according to the constructivist theory, the way people perceive their surrounding world is socially constructed. Ideas and shared knowledge about reality have a strong impact on world politics. In that sense, discourse is very important as language plays a predominant role in shaping reality and in influencing the way people perceive it (Kegley 2009, 39-42). Consequently, labelling (or naming) in itself, as written by Jackson, is 'always a highly charged process that can have serious political and social consequences' (2005: 23). As added by Michael Bhatia:

'Once assigned, the power of a name is such that the process by which the name was selected generally disappears and a series of normative associations, motives and characteristics are attached to the named subject' (2005: 8).

The terrorist label in particular has a strong political impact as it delegitimizes the actors it targets. First and foremost, this can be explained by the emotional impact of the term (Bartolucci 2010: 122). Referring to an actor as a terrorist implies inferring fear towards his actions and motives because of

'the possibility of being caught in a terrorist attack – of being injured or killed, or of this fate befalling someone we love or value – [which] is something to be dreaded' (Burkitt 2005: 684).

By using such emotional words, it is thus easier for the labelling actors to manipulate the way the audience perceives the so-called terrorist group since it hampers the extent to which people will be able and likely to rationally analyse these groups.

Another reason for the delegitimizing power of the terrorist label is that although there is no internationally agreed definition of terrorism, all its available definitions refer to the phenomenon as something profoundly pejorative, as something 'the bad guys do' (Jenkins 1980: 1). The terrorist label and the terrorist rhetoric in general are thus effective at delegitimizing political opponents for the way in which they create a 'binary opposition' and an 'othering discourse' (Bartolucci 2010: 123). When referring to an actor as a terrorist, the labelling actor makes a 'moral judgment' about the characteristics of the labelled and at the same time affirms what his own characteristics are (Jenkins 1980: 1). As explained by Kapitan, there is a 'speaker-oriented bias', which implies

"a reference to the speaker's point of view, so that, for practical purposes, 'terrorism' is coextensive with the phrase 'terrorism against us'. In this way, it behaves much like the phrase 'the enemy'" (2003: 4).

The actor labelled as terrorist symbolizes the bad, the evil, whereas the labelling actor represents himself as the righter of wrongs. There is consequently a Manichean approach in discourses relative to terrorism condemnation.

'Terrorism' usually refers to a mode of attack that is particularly cruel, unfair and illegitimate as it especially targets civilians and thus does not obey any rule. This is contrary to conventional war, for example, which rejects attacks on civilians. Consequently, when a political actor labels as terrorism the acts of his opponents, it implies that their actions, and especially the violent ones, are unjustifiable. Most groups who are labelled terrorists have specific political goals that can be justified to a certain extent, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which aims to create a Kurdish state in the Middle East, or Hamas, which aims to stop Israeli occupation and create a Palestinian state. Nevertheless, calling them terrorists delegitimizes their motives in the sense that they are described as being pure manifestations of hatred and sometimes jealousy, aiming to disrupt a society's order. As argued by General Basbug of the Turkish Land Forces, for example, the PKK members are 'separatist terrorists' and their actions are aimed at 'destroy[ing] the Turkish state and [its unity]' (Barrinha 2011: 171). The same rhetoric was present in the discourses of the Bush Administration, claiming that the groups it labelled as terrorists wanted to 'kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life' because 'they hate [Americans'] freedoms' (Bartolucci 2010: 123).

There is consequently a 'securitisation language game' where the attention of the audience is shifted away from the legitimacy of 'terrorist' groups' political goals (Staun 2010, 403). Instead, the emphasis is put on the threat the group poses to important national ideas such as security, unity and order, which can easily rally the population. As written by Bhatia: 'as the identification of the core purpose of the violent act constitutes the substance of violence's legitimacy, the desire here is to assert immediately that violence against the state is not legitimate, well-founded or

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justified but driven by subsidiary and less noble motives' (2005: 14). It is then possible to see that by calling an opponent a 'terrorist', his political goals are either distorted or unaddressed, which is thus a cause of delegitimization. A theoretical reason why this happens can be found in the writings of Max Abrahms. Abrahms uses the correspondent inference theory according to which 'the objectives of [an] actor are presumed to be encoded in the outcome of the behaviour' and thus argues that terrorism has 'extremely high correspondence' (2006: 58). Consequently, if a group of political opponents uses violence against a government in order to protest its policies and this attack causes some physical damage, labelling this group as terrorist will focus public and political attention on the violence committed by this group. This thus implies that the primary motives of this group were to cause this damage and disturb the order of society. This is proved by the way Benjamin Netanyahu describes terrorism in his book 'Terrorism: How the West can win', where he wrote that 'the root cause of terrorism lies not in grievances but in a disposition toward unbridled violence' (through Kapitan 2003: 12), which confirms Bhatia's argument according to which 'the barbarism of the acts themselves is assigned to the character of the actor' (2005: 19).

At the same time, the labelling actor shifts the attention of the audience away from some of his policies that could have caused the complaints of the so-called terrorists. As argued by Kapitan about the terrorist rhetoric of Benjamin Netanyahu in his book: 'by classifying Palestinian resistance to Israeli policies as "terrorism" and by portraying "terrorists" as some sort of monsters unworthy of moral dialogue, [...] [he] shift[s] political focus away from Israeli designs, policies, and actions in the occupied territories, e.g., its land confiscations, settlement building, and human rights violations, and towards the more sensational reactions by the Palestinians' (2003: 13). The terrorist label is thus effective in two ways: by implying that terrorism is somehow irrational as it is only motivated by violence, the targeted group is depoliticized as well as delegitimized and the labelling party frees himself from guilt in front of his audience.

When focusing on a more legal perspective, since attacks qualified as terrorist have a particularly cruel and unfair connotation, negotiations with groups accused of terrorism are profoundly discouraged. The reason for this is that negotiating with so-called terrorists, addressing their demands and reaching compromises with them would appear as being a way of justifying terrorism and presenting it as a successful tool to reach political goals. In other words, it would imply that violent actions against civilians, often described as innocents, can be effective to impulse policy changes. Consequently, when a political actor labels as terrorist his opponents, this gives him the right to disregard negotiations with them, which is in itself a form of delegitimizing his opponents as it implies that they cannot be treated as equal actors, only as a threat. Barrinha, for example, explains that 'opening the door for negotiations with the [so-called terrorist] [means] recognising their political legitimacy' (2011: 176). Following this logic, refusing to negotiate is a way of delegitimizing actors. Kapitan also argues that by using the terrorist rhetoric, 'it repudiates any call to negotiate with [the groups described as terrorists]' (2003: 7). At the same time, the delegitimization that results from the labelling of an opposition group as terrorist justifies violent reprisal actions against them that are not condemned by the international community, but are even supported, as the delegitimization of the targeted group can be witnessed beyond national borders. This was the case during the infamous War on Terror launched by the Bush administration in the Middle East, as well as the attacks over PKK camps in Northern Iraq by Turkish forces. In both cases, the international community either participated directly or tolerated the violence, as it was directed against 'terrorists'.

However, the use of the terrorist label does not always automatically lead to a delegitimization of the individual or the group targeted by the term, and several conditions have to be taken into consideration in order to ensure its effectiveness. According to what has been argued so far, delegitimizing a political opponent involves influencing the way he is perceived by the audience and the international community. There are, however, several types of audiences and whether they are convinced by official discourses will depend on several factors. This is part of what Greisman calls relativism. He argues that '[when] people identify with the victim of a terrorist act, the act becomes terrorist. If they identify with the perpetrator, it becomes something more justified, plausible, or praiseworthy' (through Staun 2010: 410). This will first depend on ideology, since 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter' (Jenkins 1980, 2). This can be illustrated by the case of the Hamas organization, which won a majority of seats in the 2006 Palestinian legislative election despite the fact that the international community was used to labelling it as terrorist.

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A second important factor is the degree to which the public trusts the government or the labelling actor in general, because this will determine whether it will be influenced by official discourses or not. The level of trust will itself be relative to the context. After the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, discourses of Bush about the War on Terror were at first very well received by the American population, due to the level of fear and paranoia that had spread over American society after 9/11. On the contrary, the Popular Party governing Spain during the 2004 Madrid train bombings was not as effective in delegitimizing its domestic political opponents when it called them 'terrorists' during anti-government demonstrations. This was due to the fact that there was previously growing scepticism about the government and recorded episodes of past manipulation, which affected negatively the people's level of trust in the government. This lack of effectiveness was reflected in the outcome of the 2004 general elections (Blakeley 2006: 1-19). Finally, with the current state of communication technology and its relatively easy access, individuals or groups that are targeted by the terrorist label have now the means to counter official discourses, thanks to devices such as the Internet. With the phenomenon of modernization provoked by globalization, targeted groups have the means to increase the projection of their messages and thus justify their actions to the public. As stated by Bhatia, 'the global discourse is no longer one where a singular hegemon or state is able to dictate one name and have this universally followed and used by its intended audience' (2005: 19). It can however be argued that despite these progresses, these groups' messages will have much more difficulty in convincing the audience of their legitimacy than if they had not been targeted by the terrorist label. This can be explained by the fact that 'these labelling processes [...] are associated with a potentially long-term disruption of normal political life' (Barrinha 2011: 164).

To conclude, the effectiveness of the terrorist label in delegitimizing political opponents can be assessed by the degree to which the use of this label influences how the audience and the international community perceive these opponents, and how it affects the way the audience understands the messages of the so-called terrorists. Using labels in politics is in itself a strategic tool, because of how it simplifies reality and assigns some long-term characteristics to actors. The terrorist label, in particular, is a powerful means to reach political goals, because of the emotional impact it has on the audience as well as the memories it provokes from past manifestations of violence. By using the fear caused by the terrorist label, governments and labelling actors in general have better chances to manipulate the way the audience will perceive the message of their political opponents. The strongly negative connotation of the term and the way it distorts or ignores the political goals of one's opponents enables their delegitimization and justifies violent retaliation against them, as well as the absence of negotiations and dialogue. Kapitan, however, warns about the dangerous consequences of using this strategy to delegitimize opponents. As it does not address the grievances of opponents, this strategy can lead to an escalation of violence, since,

'as long as they perceive themselves to be victims of intolerable injustices and view their oppressors as unwilling to arrive at an acceptable compromise, [these opponents] are likely to answer violence with more violence' (2003: 9).

Consequently, the use of the terrorist label might be effective in delegitimizing political opponents but it also has the consequence of exacerbating their grievances, which, in the long term, can have dramatic consequences for the whole of society.

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