

# Does Terrorism Pose a Real Threat to Security?

Written by Patrick Ervine

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2010/11/15/does-terrorism-pose-a-real-threat-to-security/>

PATRICK ERVINE, NOV 15 2010

Terrorism has become the most prominent security issue of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and the response of western states to the threat posed by terrorism has also been highly controversial. Terrorism has existed since 66AD with the *sicarii* in Palestine whose activities “would qualify them as terrorists”[1]. This means terrorism is by no means a new thing. While terrorism’s origins may be easy to trace, the definition of terrorism is much more difficult to come to terms with as the pejorative nature of the word has resulted in no internationally agreed-upon legal definition. This problem is highlighted in Afghanistan where the United States of America supported the Islamist Mujahideen against the Soviet military in the 1980s, many of the leaders of these groups then became leaders in the Taliban regime that the United States overthrew and is currently engaged in suppressing, resulting in a totally contradictory stance on the same terrorist group in the same location. There are also many types of security with traditional and new security having differing views on where the emphasis of security should lie and what security actually is. This essay will first discuss what terrorism is including an attempt at a definition and the threat it poses, followed by the discussion on what security is and how terrorism fits into the many aspects of security today. It will be concluded that while terrorism does pose a threat to security there are more important security issues to be addressed.

Without a basic definition the answer to whether or not terrorism poses a threat to security cannot be answered, therefore this will be discussed first. A simple definition is that terrorism is “the threat of violence and the use of fear to coerce, persuade, and gain public attention”[2] however this makes no reference to the political nature of terrorism. The United States Department of State has a more complete definition of terrorism “Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”[3] this definition does mention the political aspect of terrorism however the definition supplied by Wardlaw is a much more complete:

The use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group larger than the immediate victims with the purpose of coercing that group into acceding to the political demands of the perpetrators.[4]

Wardlaw’s definition takes the political nature of terrorism into account, includes reference to terrorism’s relationship with government and the effect on a wider audience beyond the individuals involved. All of this shows how terrorism relies on fear in the general public of the targeted state and the political nature of terrorism, that separate it from acts of revenge and criminal violence, combined to achieve specific political goals such as the release of political prisoners. Terrorism is a tactic of the relatively weak, a small group with little power can influence events out of all proportion to the group’s size with the use of terrorism[5]. Groups can use terrorism to attract media attention to a cause, cause widespread panic or force a government to concede to specific demands. Terrorist attacks are generally random with regards to the individuals killed, with the exception of assassination, the terrorists did not care who was in the world trade centre on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, only that there was a large number there.

The number of people killed in terrorist attacks worldwide is very few and while the loss of these people is devastating to the families of the victims it does mean that “terrorism is one of the minor causes of human suffering in the world”[6]. When compared to the number of people killed in the recent Haiti earthquake, 90,000[7]-230,000[8], the attacks on the United States of America on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, that killed 2,973[9], seem minor on the

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global scale however the strength of response by the United States Government shows that the number of people killed alone is not the most disturbing factor in the attacks. Although planes had been hijacked many times prior to 9/11 their use as “flying bombs”[10] was unknown, their use to destroy the centre of American finance and seriously damage the centre of the United States military made the attacks much more alarming to the American public. The September the 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and the global war on terrorism are products of our time, the entire sequence of events on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September was transmitted live around the world making for maximum shock and every step of the war on terror has been recorded and shown on television and this public scrutiny has led to the war on terrorism being unique as the public watches the retribution of the state onto their perceived enemies.

The difference between the definition of terrorism given by Wardlaw and the definition given by the US Department of State is the matter of state terrorism, Wardlaw’s definition includes state terrorism however the United States government definition only includes state sponsored terrorism. State terrorism does exist and was seen at its worst in Stalin’s purges in the 1930s however state terrorism has been used by colonial powers in attempts to control the populace and in recent times in Latin America disappearances and death squads have been linked to the United States[11], this shows that terrorism is not the sole remit of “evil” states but also of legitimate states pursuing their interests. In November of 2004 the Iraqi city of Fallujah was put back under military control, this involved the dropping of heavy ordinance on the city, the military success was seen with great satisfaction in the United States military and among the US population, however throughout the middle east this was seen as full state terrorism equal to the 9/11 attacks.[12] The battle of Fallujah counts as terrorism if Wardlaw’s definition is applied to the situation but not if it is applied to the US Department of State’s definition.

In conclusion, terrorism can be undertaken by both the state and sub state actors, can be local or international and it is the use or threat of violence to induce fear in an audience beyond those directly affected in order to achieve a political goal. The threat of terrorism does not come from the number of people killed, the threat is in the very nature of terrorism, the random nature of the victims, the symbol of destroying a part of a state’s culture, such as the world trade centre, the effect terrorism has on the media and the benefits terrorists gain from the media’s obsession with them and their activities.

To decide whether or not terrorism is a threat to security it must first be discussed what security actually is. Often, security is regarded as synonymous with survival however it is more accurately “the alleviation of threats to cherished values; especially those which, if left unchecked threaten the survival of a particular referent object in the near future”[13] this means that security is the protection of a way of life not just protection from direct invasion or, as Ken Booth put it “survival-plus”[14]. During the Cold War security only went as far as the four Ss: “States, strategy, science and the status Quo”[15] States were seen as the most important part of security and the other three Ss were based on this assumption. Strategy was the planning of strategy in case of another war between industrialised nations or nuclear war. Science was emphasised as security was approached in a scientific manner to plan effectively. Finally, the status Quo was there as any radical change in the international system was seen as unacceptable[16]. This view is still held by some today as being the only real focus of security however the term security now encompasses a much wider subject area. The perception of security as a purely military matter was challenged by Barry Buzan in his book *People, States and Fear*[17] where he doesn’t refer to states alone but to all human collectives and he developed his five sectors of security. The military aspect that was the sole focus of the four Ss was downgraded to one of the five factors, it was still a very important part but the newly dubbed strategic studies was no longer the sole focus of security studies. The political sector focuses on the stability of states and types of government and the legitimacy of certain ideologies.[18] The economic sector focused on “the resources, finance, and markets necessary to sustain acceptable levels of welfare and state power”[19]. The societal sector focused on culture, religion and national identity. The societal sector has become more important since the start of the Global war on terror where the west is waging wars in states with vastly different and diverse cultures within them. The Environmental sector is last and focuses on the natural environment as it is the “essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend”[20] and is ignored in the four Ss.

Whose security is the term “security” actually referring to? The view has traditionally been that the state is at the heart of security with “national security” dictating what the security issues are, however at the end of the Cold War analysts began to shift the emphasis onto the individual however this creates its own problem of which people to prioritize

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since the government cannot provide everything for every individual in the state. This is overcome by the concept of a society so individuals are grouped together based on any combination of location, age, nationality, sexual orientation etcetera. The needs of these groups are much easier to cater for and their security easier to ensure. Recently the question of ecological security has become more prominent, it is argued that "at a basic level, security policies must make ecological sense" this is true of societal, political and economic security as if some of the more dire predictions regarding global warming are correct it would certainly become a threat to cherished values and to the way of life of people all over the world. However, the question of ecological security cannot be applied to military security issues as they must be free from the restrictions on their ecological impact and focus entirely on the ability to defend the state and the people from direct outside military threats.

The question of what a security issue actually is a controversial one and subject to individual perspective, the political power of the individual or the society that decides what a security issue is greatly effects whether or not it can or will be acted upon, the conflict of interest between the powerful and less powerful becomes much more obvious here. In the view of the United States Al-Qaeda posed a serious security threat post September 11<sup>th</sup> however the pre-invasion Taliban government of Afghanistan did not see them as a security issue however as a result of the United State's higher level of power Al-Qaeda's training facilities and bases in Afghanistan were destroyed and they are now being pursued worldwide. The United Nations panel on Threats, challenges and Change has said that there are six types of threat: economic and social threats; inter-state conflict; internal conflict; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational organised crime[21] and while it does go into detail on the nature of the threats there is no attempt at prioritisation leaving it up to states to prioritise for themselves meaning western states will tend to prioritise terrorism and weapons of mass destruction while states from the developing world place more emphasis on armed conflict and economic and social threats.

To conclude on security, it can be defined as "the alleviation of threats to cherished values; especially those which, if left unchecked threaten the survival of a particular referent object in the near future." [22] During the Cold War this extended only as far as state security however it has since been extended to include; the military, political, economic, societal and environmental sectors of security. The United Nations has published a list of security threats which amounted to economic and social threats; inter-state conflict; internal conflict; nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons; terrorism; and transnational organised crime and this is the most inclusive list of threats published to date. Security can be applied to the individual, society, or the state and where the emphasis lies is a matter of debate as is which threats take priority over the others.

In conclusion, terrorism is:

The use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group larger than the immediate victims with the purpose of coercing that group into acceding to the political demands of the perpetrators.[23]

And while it is not a major cause of human suffering it does have an effect beyond the immediate suffering it does cause due to its malicious and random nature and the targeting of symbolic buildings for political goals leading to fear in the populace. Security is "the alleviation of threats to cherished values; especially those which, if left unchecked threaten the survival of a particular referent object in the near future." [24] and since terrorism does fall with this definition terrorism is a real threat to security but it is not the most serious threat to the security of western states.

[1] Wardlaw, G. (1982). *Political Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg 18

[2] National Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals. *Report of the Task Force on Disorders and Terrorism*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1976. Pg 7

[3] US Department of State. *Annual Country Reports on Terrorism*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001. Pg 13

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[4] Wardlaw, G. (1982). *Political Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg 16

[5] Ibid. Pg 3

[6] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 172

[7] Melissen, Hans Jaap. "Haiti Death Toll well under 100,000." *Radio Netherlands Worldwode*. February 23, 2010. <http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/haiti-quake-death-toll-well-under-100000> (accessed May 2, 2010).

[8] "BBC News – Haiti quake death toll rises to 230,000." *BBC News*. February 11, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8507531.stm> (accessed May 2, 2010).

[9] Alfano, Sean. "War Casualties Pass 9/11 Death Toll." *CBS News*. September 22, 2006. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/22/terror/main2035427.shtml> (accessed May 2, 2010).

[10] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 172

[11] Ibid. Pg 174

[12] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 180

[13] Ibid. Pg 5

[14] Booth, Ken. *Theory of World Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pg 103

[15] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 3

[16] Ibid. Pg 3

[17] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 4

[18] Ibid. Pg 4

[19] Ibid. Pg 4

[20] Ibid. Pg 4

[21] UN Secretary General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change. *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*. New York: UN, 2004. Pg 2

[22] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 5

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[23] Wardlaw, G. (1982). *Political Terrorism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pg 16

[24] Williams, Paul, ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2008. Pg 5

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