

TERRORISM

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1. Core Definition

Terrorism is fundamentally defined as the calculated use or threat of violence to inculcate fear, intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological. Unlike conventional warfare, which targets military assets or uses force primarily against combatants, terrorism frequently involves the deliberate targeting of **non-combatant civilians** or symbolic infrastructure to maximize psychological impact. This usage highlights the concept's reliance on generating fear far beyond the immediate victim pool, thereby pressuring decision-makers or altering public behavior. Key characteristics include the illegality of the force used and the unpredictable nature of the attacks, designed to undermine the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and erode public security.

While the source material defines it as "step-by-step intimidation or coercion to reach political or religious goals utilizing illegal and unpredictable force or violent behavior against property, people, or governments," academic definitions stress the communicative and symbolic nature of the violence. Terrorism is not merely violence; it is a form of **asymmetrical communication** where acts of destruction serve as messages to a wider audience, demanding political change or compliance. Many authoritative bodies, including the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), differentiate between domestic terrorism, perpetrated by individuals or groups inspired by U.S.-based movements, and international terrorism, which involves groups whose activities are foreign-based and/or directed by countries or groups outside the United States.

The core challenge in establishing a single, universally accepted definition stems from its inherently subjective and politically charged nature. Despite this complexity, most analyses agree that terrorism requires three essential components: the use of violence, a non-state actor (or at least actors operating outside the internationally accepted norms of warfare), and a defined political or ideological motive underlying the intimidation. Without a discernible political aim, violence, no matter how horrific, is generally classified as criminal rather than terrorist activity.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term **terrorism** originated during the French Revolution's "Reign of Terror" (1793-1794), where it was first used to describe the systematic use of state violence and repression by the Jacobin government to enforce obedience. In its original context, therefore, terrorism referred to the actions of a government directed against its own citizens, aimed at consolidating power. This etymological root--where terror is employed as a governance tool--is a crucial historical marker that

often gets overlooked in contemporary usage, which focuses almost exclusively on non-state actors.

During the late 19th century, the meaning of terrorism began to shift drastically. The rise of revolutionary movements, particularly European anarchist groups, introduced the concept of "propaganda by deed." These non-state actors adopted tactics like assassinations of heads of state and bombings to destabilize regimes and provoke popular uprisings. Figures like the Russian revolutionaries and Balkan nationalists used targeted violence, often described as **selective terrorism**, aimed at inspiring revolutionary change rather than wholesale civilian slaughter. This period solidified the concept of terrorism as violence directed against the state by sub-state entities.

The latter half of the 20th century saw two major transformations. First, post-World War II anti-colonial and nationalist struggles (such as those in Algeria, Cyprus, and Ireland) frequently incorporated terrorist tactics to drive out ruling powers, further normalizing the use of irregular violence by liberation movements. Second, beginning in the 1970s and accelerating after the Cold War, terrorism became increasingly **internationalized**, fueled by geopolitical conflicts, sophisticated technology, and, crucially, the rise of religiously motivated extremism. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State (ISIS) demonstrated a new level of lethality and organizational reach, culminating in the globally recognized events of September 11, 2001, which catalyzed the modern era of counter-terrorism policy, often referred to as the **War on Terrorism**.

3. Key Characteristics

Terrorism is defined by a set of distinct characteristics that differentiate it from other forms of political violence, such as guerrilla warfare or conventional combat. The primary distinguishing factor is the separation between the immediate victims of the violence and the ultimate target audience. The physical victims are often incidental; their deaths and suffering are merely the means by which the terrorist communicates with the true target--the state or the broader society. This reliance on **indirect psychological coercion** is central to the terrorist strategy.

Furthermore, terrorist acts are typically symbolic and unpredictable. They often target locations or individuals that represent the system the terrorists oppose--whether those are government buildings, economic symbols, or cultural icons. The unpredictability ensures that the fear generated is pervasive and difficult for security forces to contain, forcing the government to expend vast resources on generalized defense. This tactic is often referred to as **weaponization of fear**, making the psychological distress of the population a primary weapon alongside explosives or firearms.

Finally, the asymmetric nature of terrorism is a critical characteristic. It is almost exclusively the tool of the weaker party--non-state groups lacking the military strength, resources, or international

legitimacy to confront a state directly. By employing tactics that exploit the vulnerabilities of an open society, such as using civil liberties and free movement to facilitate attacks, terrorist groups attempt to negate the conventional advantages held by powerful states.

Targeting Civilians: The deliberate selection of non-combatants to maximize public outrage and panic, ensuring the event dominates public discourse.

Political Motivation: The absolute necessity of an underlying ideological, political, or religious goal that justifies the use of extreme violence.

Asymmetry and Illegality: Violence perpetrated by non-state actors (or covert state proxies) that operates outside the legal frameworks of war, making those actions criminal under international and domestic law.

Symbolic Communication: The act of violence is less important than the message it conveys to the target audience, aimed at coercion and intimidation.

4. Typologies and Forms

Academic analysis of terrorism often relies on typologies to categorize the diverse forms this violence takes, helping to better understand motivations and appropriate counter-measures. One of the most important distinctions is between **state terrorism** and non-state terrorism. While contemporary discourse focuses overwhelmingly on non-state actors, state terrorism refers to systematic acts of terror committed by governments against their own citizens or those in occupied territories to maintain political control, often manifesting as state-sponsored assassinations, disappearances, or widespread repression.

Non-state terrorism can be further broken down based on operational scope and ideology. **Domestic terrorism** involves groups or individuals operating exclusively within their home country, targeting domestic institutions (e.g., far-right extremists or single-issue environmental groups). In contrast, **international terrorism**, exemplified by groups like Al-Qaeda, involves cross-border operational planning and execution, and often targets international symbols or interests, demanding a coordinated global response.

Ideologically, terrorism can be classified into several types: **Ethno-Nationalist Terrorism** (seeking independence or autonomy for a specific ethnic group, e.g., ETA or the IRA in their prime); **Left- and Right-Wing Terrorism** (historically prevalent during the Cold War, targeting capitalist or communist systems respectively); and the most prevalent modern form, **Religious Terrorism**. Religious terrorism is often considered the most dangerous typology due to its transcendent goals, which may negate moral constraints against mass murder, viewing violence as a sacramental duty against "enemies of God."

5. Significance and Impact

The significance of terrorism extends far beyond the immediate physical damage of attacks, fundamentally shaping national security policies, international relations, and public psychology globally. Following major events, such as the 9/11 attacks, terrorism became the primary threat narrative for many Western governments, leading to massive reallocations of financial and political capital towards counter-terrorism efforts. This includes the creation of sprawling security bureaucracies, the widespread implementation of surveillance technologies, and increased scrutiny of international borders and finance. The resultant policy changes, such as the USA PATRIOT Act, have frequently sparked intense debates regarding the balance between security imperatives and the protection of civil liberties and human rights.

Economically, terrorism inflicts substantial costs, both direct and indirect. Direct costs include infrastructure damage and insurance payouts, while indirect costs are far greater, encompassing lost tourism revenue, decreased foreign direct investment in affected regions, heightened costs of doing business due to security requirements, and the long-term expense of maintaining large counter-terrorism forces and intelligence agencies. Furthermore, the psychological impact on populations is profound, leading to increased anxiety, reduced feelings of safety, and potential societal fragmentation as trust in governing institutions is eroded or ethnic/religious tensions are exacerbated by the perceived threat.

In international relations, terrorism acts as a major destabilizing force. It can transform regional conflicts into global security issues, justify foreign military interventions (as seen in Afghanistan and Iraq), and complicate diplomatic efforts by forcing alliances based on security cooperation rather than shared political goals. Therefore, while terrorist groups may be militarily weak, their ability to force powerful states to fundamentally restructure their priorities underscores the immense, disproportionate impact they wield on the global stage.

6. Debates and Criticisms

The most enduring debate surrounding terrorism is the lack of a universal, legally binding definition, a vacuum that permits governments and groups to apply the term selectively for political ends. As the adage goes, "one person's **terrorist** is another person's **freedom fighter**." This subjective application makes it difficult for the United Nations (UN) to forge unified international counter-terrorism strategies, as member states often disagree on whether specific violent non-state groups fighting for self-determination should be classified as legitimate resistance movements or criminal terrorists.

A second major criticism revolves around the exclusion of state actions from the contemporary definition. Critics argue that if the definition hinges on the use of calculated violence against non-combatants for political aims, then actions such as state-sanctioned bombings or systematic

repression by authoritarian regimes should logically be termed "terrorism" or "state terror." However, dominant Western definitions, particularly those used in international law, typically frame terrorism as violence primarily committed by non-state actors, effectively shielding state actions from the political and moral condemnation associated with the term. This debate highlights the inherent political bias embedded in the terminology itself.

Finally, there is a constant academic debate regarding the efficacy of terrorism as a strategy. While terrorism rarely achieves its maximalist goals (e.g., overthrowing a superpower), it is often highly successful at achieving limited, tactical objectives, such as forcing policy changes, gaining international attention, or disrupting peace processes. Critics and scholars continue to analyze whether counter-terrorism strategies, particularly those involving large-scale military responses (like the "War on Terror"), are counterproductive, potentially radicalizing larger pools of recruits and creating unintended consequences that sustain, rather than defeat, the threat.

Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Terrorism](#)

[Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\) definition of Terrorism](#)

[United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism](#)

[Wikipedia: USA PATRIOT Act](#)