



## Understanding Terrorism

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### Abstract

Terrorism is a strategy, in which the terrorists make use of violence to produce fear and terror among the people. It is widely recognized that terrorism constitutes one of the most potent threat to human security and at the same time it is surprising to see that there is little agreement amongst people at large about the definition of terrorism. The problem with defining terrorism is what Walter Laquer called “sophism” that one person’s terrorist is another persons’ freedom fighter. Whichever way one looks at it, terrorism is the philosophy and thought behind the use of terror as an instrument, a means in the pursuance of political goals, generally expressed through conflicts and violence. Not all violence may be treated as terror, but any violence or even fear inflicted on unarmed, innocent people, is terrorism. The main hurdle in fighting against terrorism is the definitional dilemma of the term. The non-existence of a universally accepted definition has given rise to intellectual justification of terrorism. May be this dilemma is deliberate as an objective definition may lead to categorization of many so called civilized states as terrorist states. Despite all this confusion, one should not and must not justify terrorism of any kind, neither in Fanon’s spirit, nor condemn it in President Bush’s democratic script.

This paper is an attempt to understand the politics of terrorism. The focus will be on the issues and challenges it offer with special reference to state and non-state terrorism.

**Key Words: Terrorism, State Terrorism, Non-State Terrorism**

The word ‘terrorism’ has its origin in the French word ‘terrorisme’ which is derived from the Latin verb ‘terrere’ meaning to frighten or to cause tremble. Thus, terrorism means to harm people so that they are so frightened that they start trembling. Interestingly it was originally used to describe state terror i.e. the reign of terror which prevailed in the post revolutionary France. However, meaning tied to concepts are bound to change over time in recent times, the concept of terrorism seems to have

suffered from what can be best referred to as extravagant exaggeration or hyperbole.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism is a well thought out strategy, in which the terrorists make use of violence to create fear and terror among the people. The terrorist groups may or may not have a specific goal. It is widely recognized that terrorism, be it national or international, constitutes perhaps the most potent threat to human security. Yet it is surprising to see that there is little agreement amongst people at large about the definition of terrorism, although, virtually every major state of the world in the recent epoch has referred significant casualties owing to terrorist attacks.

Terrorism is now an over defined concept, with the state, organic intellectuals, and the dissenters constantly battling out the meaning of terrorism. In the midst of their contestations, a plethora of terrorism, or what could also be referred to as 'versions of terrorism', has flooded the vocabulary of scholarly languages. Schmid and Jongman have identified 109 different definitions of terrorism, with many having violence, fear, threats, psychological effects, discrepancy between the target and the victim, planned action and strategy or tactics as key features.<sup>2</sup> What is also important to notice here is that most of the scholars have not given much importance to the actors involved in the acts of terrorism. For them terrorism is to be determined on the basis of the acts committed irrespective of the actors involved in those acts.<sup>3</sup>

The problem with defining terrorism is what Walter Laquer called "sophism" that one person's terrorist is another persons' freedom fighter.<sup>4</sup> Whichever way one looks at it, terrorism is the philosophy and thought behind the use of terror as an instrument, a means in the pursuance of political goals, generally expressed through conflicts and violence. Not all violence may be treated as terror, but any violence or even fear inflicted on unarmed, innocent people, is terrorism.

Terrorism in simple words can be defined as the tactical use of violence by the state or non state actors for achieving political objectives.<sup>5</sup> Terrorism is a technique of a powerless against the powerful. It is important to note here that the estimated casualties caused by state sponsored terrorism is over 70

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<sup>1</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, *Understanding Terrorism in South Asia: Beyond Statist Discourses*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications and Distributors, 2006, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, *Political Terrorism: A guide to actors, authors concepts, data basis, theories and literature*, North Holland: Amsterdam, 1988, p.235.

<sup>3</sup> Mohd. Mohibul Haque, *International terrorism and Violence: A Human Rights Perspective*, AMU Press Aligarh, UP in Collaboration with Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2011, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lacquer, *No End to War: Terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York: Continuum, 2003, p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> Cherif Bassiouni, *International Terrorism: Multilateral Conventions (1937-2001)*, New York: Transnational Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 46.

million during 20<sup>th</sup> century where as 100,000 people died in the non state terrorism for the same period of time.<sup>6</sup>

Terrorism is the use or threatened use of violence for a political purpose to create a state of fear, which will aid in extorting, coercing, intimidating or causing individuals and groups to alter their behavior. Terrorism can be defined by the quality of the acts and not by the identity of the perpetrators or the nature of their cause. Howe defines “The one element common to the various kinds of terror is the wish to create unmanageable fear through a use of violence that breaks down traditionally accepted distinctions between combatant and civilian”.<sup>7</sup>

Terrorism has no human face; its approach is far from humanitarian. Terrorists can kill any number of people and destroy any amount of property, just to spread fear and terror. Nobility of means is not their concern. Terrorism believes in publicity. They seek to make themselves known as widely as possible by their acts of terror. Terrorism is generally identified with attempts made by individuals or groups to destabilize or overthrow existing political institutions.

### Counter Terrorism

Counter Terrorism is a tool used by states to counter the terrorist activities. Counter Terrorism has two forms. First is negotiations, economic packages, treaties (in case of cross border terrorism). When the first technique fails second tool is used which is force or war. Army, paramilitary forces are deployed in the affected areas.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights observed in its study, Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism:

“In recent years, the measures adopted by states to counter terrorism have themselves often posed serious challenges to human rights and the rule of law. Some states have engaged in torture and other methods of counter terrorism, while the large and practical safeguards available to prevent tortures, such as regular and independent monitoring of detention centers, and have often been disregarded. Other states have returned persons suspected of engaging in terrorist’s activities to countries where they face a real risk of torture or other serious human rights abuse thereby violating the international legal obligation of non-refoulment”.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately when we talk about countering terrorism we focus on non state terrorism only though the fact is that the state is also the culprit of terrorism.

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<sup>6</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, *Understanding Terrorism in South Asia: Beyond Statist Discourses*, New Delhi: Manohar Publications and Distributors, 2006, pp. 16-42.

<sup>7</sup> Adluri Subramanyam Raja, *Terrorism in South Asia: views from India*, New Delhi: Indian Research Press, 2004, pp. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, Fact Sheet No.32, Officer of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, p. 1.

**CONCLUSION:**

Terrorism constitutes a threat to all: what is being inflicted on one country today can be inflicted on another tomorrow. The main hurdle in fighting against terrorism is the definitional dilemma of the term. The non existence of a universally accepted definition has given rise to intellectual justification of terrorism. May be this dilemma is deliberate as an objective definition may lead to categorization of many so called civilized state as terrorist states. Despite all this confusion, one should not and must not justify terrorism of any kind, neither in Fanon's spirit, nor condemn it in President Bush's democratic script.

Terrorism has given rise to conservatism and militarism. Earlier the fall of the Berlin Wall gave impetus to international liberalism. Now the fall of Twin Towers of the WTC, however, has, reversed the trend, making human rights and the concept of human security its first victim. The profound search for the security of the state has pushed democratic project to a situation of uncertainty, discarding the development goals in favor of security by diverting greater resources to militarization.

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