

Defining Terrorism

Attempts to define terrorism tend to have political implications and the U.S. State Department's definition is not as neutral as it sounds.

By Neve Gordon

It was in 1968 with a series of airplane hijackings that Palestinian insurgent groups began employing terrorism against Israel. During the thirty years that have since elapsed, there have been numerous terrorist attacks and hundreds of innocent people have died. In 1972, for example, eight masked gunmen raided the pavilion of the Israeli Olympic team in Munich, killing the athletes and their coaches. Two years later, three members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine took over a school in Ma'alot, an Israeli town located near the Lebanese border. When the negotiations broke down and the Israeli troops stormed the dormitory, the terrorists machine-gunned the children, killing 27 and wounding an additional 70. More recently, suicide bombers have replaced machine-guns. Between 1993 and 1996, almost 200 Israelis were killed when members of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad exploded themselves in commuter buses, markets and other public places. While most people would not dispute that such acts fall under the term terrorism, there is, nonetheless, an ongoing debate concerning terrorism's very definition. Two questions that repeatedly come up in this debate have to do with the identity of the actors involved and the constitution of the terrorist act. As we will see, the way these questions are addressed often reflects political alliances and have concrete political implications.

Controlling Words

The concept of terrorism emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution when it was used to describe the violent suppression of the population by the state; terrorism was the instrument the state wielded against its own citizens. By 1937, the League of Nations had turned around the word's meaning, defining terrorism as "criminal acts directed against a state and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or the general public." Formulated by states, this definition implies that terrorism can be perpetrated solely by non-state actors. Why, one might ask, was the definition altered?

George Orwell suggests that the modification of language is not a result of

“natural growth,” but, rather, language is an instrument which is constantly changed in order to advance political objectives. In his novel 1984, he portrays a chilling political world where Newspeak, the official language introduced by the government, facilitates the manipulation of Oceania’s population. In big letters on the outer wall of the Ministry of Truth, the Party’s three slogans are inscribed for all to see: “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength.” Although 1984 depicts a fictional totalitarian regime, its account of how language is employed as a political tool also rings true with respect to modern democracies.

The importance of controlling the meaning of words in public language was initiated by Thomas Hobbes already in the mid-17th century. From his assumption that the lack of an overarching power entails anarchy, Hobbes infers that, in order to attain peace, humans must transfer most of their rights to a sovereign so that the predominant source of power will be in the hands of one authority. Hobbes, I believe, is also referring to the transfer of epistemological rights where the people confer on the sovereign the right to interpret most matters of fact. He realized that interpretive dissent may lead to political conflict and strife and concluded that the sovereign should be granted the power to determine the meaning of words in public language. In the context of the word “terrorism,” the sovereign may attribute the act to the other, to those who aim to undermine the system of government or a specific policy promoted by the government. Accordingly, the powerful phrase “decade of terror” (1968-78) coined by analysts in the late 1970s, refers to acts perpetrated by Basque Separatists, Tupac Amaru, Palestinians, etc., and not to violence practiced by the state.

Exploring the Definition

Let us examine the United States Department of State’s current definition of terrorism as it appears in its publication *Patterns of Global Terrorism* (1997). The definition is divided into three clauses, the first of which reads: “The term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”

Exploring this definition through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proves revealing. One immediately notices that Palestinian terrorism corresponds with this part of the definition as it is violent, premeditated, and usually perpetrated against noncombatant targets. In addition, the terrorist acts were politically motivated. Interestingly, though, this clause of the definition also includes the identity of the actor: insofar as only “subnational groups or clandestine agents” are the perpetrators of terrorism, a state, as such, cannot practice terrorism. Identifying the actor circumscribes the extension of terrorism’s meaning so that within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, only Palestinians, as stateless people, can be perpetrators of terrorism.

Although circumscribing terrorism's definition in this way may appear to be neutral — as it corresponds directly with an objective reality — I would argue that the demarcation reflects particular power relations. In other words, the language that is used informs us about the underlying forces at work in our society. For instance, a Hobbesian could claim that terrorism is ascribed to non-state actors because currently the state is the predominant power in both the national and international arena. Competing producers of terror are a risk to the existing order and to its authority and, therefore, need to be eliminated, or, at least, contained. This process is not merely limited to the employment of brute force, but also to the manipulation of language, which, in turn, helps shape public opinion and foreign policy. While the government might also be producing terror, this terror is not conceived as a threat to the existing status quo, but rather as a sustaining force. Utilizing their epistemological power, governments distinguish between two forms of terror. The form of terror which is the guardian of the status quo and/or the existing political order is given a different name (e.g., “maintaining order” or even “upholding democracy”); while the form of terror that challenges the existing political order and which is considered by the government as a threat, is named terror. This kind of analysis goes beyond the wording of the State Department's definition, since it suggests that it is not so much the type of actor (state vs. non-state) that determines whether the act is to be considered terrorism, but rather what the actor's specific relation to the existing system is. Such analysis insinuates that once the actor's identity, and not solely the act itself, determines whether it falls under the term terrorism, then at least theoretically, terrorism can always be attributed to the state's official enemies and never to the state itself or its allies. This leaves one to ponder whether the fact that Israel has never been accused of practicing terrorism really indicates that a qualitative difference exists between its actions and those perpetrated by Palestinian insurgent groups.

A Different Definition

Examining Israel's actions through a different definition of political terrorism enables us to treat Israel and the Palestinians, at least initially, as having an equal capacity to employ terrorism. University of Notre Dame political scientist George Lopez defines terrorism in the following manner: Terrorism is a form of political violence that by design violates some of the society's accepted moral and legal codes, is often ruthlessly destructive, and is somewhat unpredictable in who will be its instrumental targets. Terrorism hardly constitutes mindless violence. Instead, it reflects a detailed strategy that uses horrific violence to make people feel weak and vulnerable, often disproportionate to either the terrorist acts or to the terrorists' long-term

power. This fear seeks to promote concrete political objectives. This definition captures all the incidents of Palestinian terrorism described above. Yet it does not identify the perpetrator of the act and, therefore, does not determine in advance that non-state actors are the sole agents of terrorism. Once the actor is considered to be an insignificant variable, it becomes easier to judge the act itself.

Scrutiny of Israel's actions in Lebanon indicates that it has often used methods of terror. Notable examples are two fairly recent operations: Accountability (July 1993) and Grapes of Wrath (April 1996). Israel's stated political objective in these operations was to foment a refugee flow from southern Lebanon to the north in order to put pressure on the Lebanese government, so that it, in turn, would curb guerrilla actions perpetrated by Hizbullah. In a report on Operation Accountability, Human Rights Watch (HRW) asserts: While Israel has claimed that broadcast warnings to the civilian population in southern Lebanon were made with a view to protecting civilians from collateral injury in attacks on strictly military objectives, a number of factors make it reasonable to assume that the intention was in fact to sow terror among the civilian population... as the pattern of physical damage showed, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its mercenary South Lebanese Army subjected entire villages to area bombardment. The threats and the nature of the attacks make it clear that in significant areas in southern Lebanon whole populations — indeed anyone who failed to flee by a certain time — were targeted as if they were combatants.

HRW estimates that some 120 civilians were killed and close to 50 injured during the operation. In addition, the bombing led to the immediate displacement of an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people. Less than three years later, Israel launched a similar attack, this time calling it Grapes of Wrath. According to Israel's quality paper Ha'aretz (April 21, 1996), the military command of the northern border's internal report indicate that, in the first few days of the operation, Israeli air force planes bombed 300 sites in Lebanon, resulting in the displacement of approximately 400,000 civilians and the demolition of over 200 houses. Moreover, some 198 civilians were killed, including the 97 refugees in the village of Qana.

These operations appear to correspond with the definition of terrorism, for they violate some of society's accepted moral and legal codes, they are ruthlessly destructive, and unpredictable in who will be targeted. The Israeli generals who planned the action knew in advance that innocent people would surely die as a result of the bombing and, in line with the definition, these generals contrived a detailed strategy that used horrific violence in order to make people feel weak and vulnerable. The resulting fear sought to promote concrete political objectives exceeding the violent act, since, as mentioned, Israel terrorized the population of southern Lebanon, so that it, in turn, would pressure the Lebanese government to clamp down on Hizbullah.

Israel, one should note, has practiced terrorism in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as well. During the Intifada, Israeli undercover units (called Mistarvim, which in Hebrew means to disguise oneself as a Palestinian) penetrated Palestinian settlements, killing Palestinians by means of summary executions: the unit located the victim, and without attempting to arrest him, shot in order to kill. According to HRW, the Mistarvim killed more than 110 Palestinians from the beginning of the Intifada until November 1992. The actions and methods used by the undercover units and the objectives Israel wanted to achieve by these killings conform to the definition of terrorism used here. Thus, in contrast to the first clause of the State Department's definition of terrorism, Lopez's definition reveals that states utilize methods of terror against their enemies in order to accomplish a particular premeditated political goal. The character of the perpetrator does not determine the nature of the act, or conversely, the character of one act does not necessarily predict the type of perpetrator. Accordingly, the means applied can vary: a plane bombing in southern Lebanon or a suicide bomber can achieve similar results. Lopez's definition of terrorism may differ from the State Department's due to the different context in which the term is defined — academy vs. government — and because in each context the term terrorism has a different function. In the lethal language game pertaining to terrorism, we notice that the first clause of the State Department's definition favors the U.S. and its allies in unequivocal terms. Regarding U.S.-Israel relations, if the State Department were to adopt Lopez's definition of terrorism, it would have had to indict Israel as a terrorist state. Then, according to U.S. law, Israel would no longer be able to trade with the U.S., nor would Israel be eligible for the \$3billion annual aid. In addition, the Pentagon would not be allowed to provide weapons to the Israeli army. Other allies, such as Indonesia, would also have trouble receiving indulgent treatment.

Terrorist States

Turning to the second clause of the State Department's definition, we read "the term 'international terrorism' means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country." This clause is straightforward and is based on what appears to be a tautological idea: the difference between terrorism and international terrorism is the international dimension. The term "international terrorism" means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country. In other words, two categories are introduced — citizenship and territory — in order to affirm the international component: any terrorist act that involves a plurality of at least one of these categories is considered to be international.

The third and final clause intends to capture not only the term "terrorist group," but the notion of state-sponsored terrorism which was officially

introduced by the State Department in 1979. The term “terrorist group” means any group practicing, or that has significant subgroups that practice international terrorism. This clause is complex because it attempts to corroborate the notion that only non-state actors can practice terrorism while simultaneously granting a role to the state. By distinguishing between a group that actually practices terrorism and a group that does not employ terrorism, but has “significant subgroups that practice terrorism,” the State Department makes room for the idea of state-sponsored terrorism without having to entertain the notion that states are actually perpetrators of terrorism. The neologism “state-sponsored terrorism” demonstrates in a more specific way how language can be modified in order to support U.S. foreign policy. During the same period that the “state-sponsored terrorism” category was introduced, the term “terrorist state” began to appear in State Department literature. “Terrorist state,” however, refers only to countries that sponsor terrorist groups and does not denote the actual use of terrorism by the state. In other words, it is a corollary of “state-sponsored terrorism.” This point is crucial because, as mentioned, U.S. law imposes trade and other restrictions on terrorist states. Thus, reinstating the original meaning to the term “terrorist state” — the one used in the aftermath of the French Revolution — would have endangered trade relations with countries like Indonesia and China whose profitable markets are sought by U.S. corporations. Why, one may ask, did the State Department introduce such terms as “state-sponsored terrorism” and “terrorist state” at all? One answer could be that these terms were employed as a result of some kind of reality check where the State Department suddenly realized that states sponsor terrorism. Since some of the Palestinian terrorist acts depicted above were sponsored by states, it would be hard to argue that state sponsorship is not an important aspect of terrorism. Nonetheless, following Noam Chomsky, I believe that it was not solely a reality check that led to the introduction of “state-sponsored terrorism”; other issues were involved as well.

Among other things, the concerted effort to justify the vast federal expenditure on the military comes to mind. Particularly after the demise of the Cold War, the Pentagon, backed by the corporations on which it confers billion-dollar contracts, needed to explain why the U.S. must continue to sustain a massive military apparatus. Tupac Amaru or Hamas could not do the job; they were too small, too far away. An imminent threat was needed, one that could raise enough fear to justify a bloated military budget. The capacity to manipulate the meaning of words was utilized and the term “terrorist state” was introduced with the hope that state sponsors of terrorism, like Libya, Iran and Syria, could be used to generate the necessary anxiety.

Currents in U.S. Policy

We notice that thought corrupts language, but as George Orwell suggests,

“language can also corrupt thought.” The State Department’s ability to corrupt thought becomes apparent once one considers that within the U.S., the public perceives Libya and Syria to be among the most menacing countries, while Indonesia, which has killed over 200,000 East Timorese out of a total population of 700,000, is not considered to be threatening. It is also no coincidence that the majority of the U.S. population believe that Palestinians employ terrorism and Israel does not.

By revealing the function of the State Department’s definition of terrorism, this essay has exposed some of the underlying currents in U.S. foreign policy and a number of mechanisms by which language becomes a political tool. But an examination of terrorism’s definition lays bare only a limited aspect of the relation between language and politics. Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of the State Department’s definition is that it is self-indicting. Chomsky has pointed out that even according to the definitions employed by the State Department, the CIA and the FBI, the U.S. has been the biggest supporter of international terrorism since the end of the Second World War. The fact that this amoral character of U.S. policies is, generally speaking, absent from the public’s eye and mind indicates that control of the meaning of words is not the only way by which language facilitates manipulation; a variety of other variables are involved, not least of which is the role of the media.

Recommended Reading

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