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TERRORISM  
*and*  
U.S. FOREIGN  
POLICY

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# The Dimensions of Terrorism and Counterterrorism

**D**elimiting a subject is the first step in dealing with it intelligently, and this is especially true of terrorism and counterterrorism. Terrorism has often been conceived in intractably broad ways, while the costs of terrorism and the ways to combat it tend to be construed too narrowly.

## What Terrorism Is

Efforts to define terrorism have consumed much ink. A recent book on terrorism, for example, devotes an entire chapter to definitions; the chapter documents previous definitional attempts by earlier scholars, some of whom gave up the effort.<sup>1</sup> Many students of terrorism clearly consider its definition an important and unresolved issue.<sup>2</sup> The concern about definitions, besides reflecting any scholar's commendable interest in being precise about one's subject matter, stems from the damage done by the countless twisted and polemical uses through the years of the term "terrorism." The one thing on which every user of the term agrees is that terrorism is bad. So it has been a catch-all pejorative, applied mainly to matters involving force or political authority in some way but sometimes applied even more broadly to just about any disliked action associated with someone else's policy agenda.

The semantic quagmire has been deepened not only by indiscriminate application of the term terrorism but also by politically inspired efforts *not* to apply it. This was most in evidence in the 1970s, when multilateral

discussion of the subject in the United Nations General Assembly and elsewhere invariably bogged down amid widespread resistance to any condemnation—and hence any labeling as terrorism—of the actions of groups that had favored status as “national liberation movements” or the like. Variations on this pattern have continued to frustrate efforts to arrive at an internationally accepted definition of terrorism.

Another, less frequent, tendentious approach to defining terrorism is to define it in ways that presuppose particular policy responses. For example, define it as a crime if you want to handle it mainly as a law enforcement matter, define it as war if you intend to rely on military means, and so on. Arguing semantics as a surrogate for arguing about policy is a confusing, cumbersome, and ultimately poor way to arrive at a policy.

A reasonable definition of terrorism would capture the key elements of what those leaders and respondents to opinion polls who have expressed concern about terrorism probably have in mind, without being so broad as to include much else that is not in fact the concern of those whose job descriptions mention terrorism. As good a definition as any, given some clarification and minor modification, is the statutory one that the U.S. government uses in keeping statistics on international terrorism: terrorism, for that purpose, means “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”<sup>3</sup> This definition has four main elements.

The first, premeditation, means there must be an intent and prior decision to commit an act that would qualify as terrorism under the other criteria. An operation may not be executed as intended and may fail altogether, but the intent must still be there. The action is the result of someone’s policy, or at least someone’s decision. Terrorism is not a matter of momentary rage or impulse. It is also not a matter of accident.

The second element, political motivation, excludes criminal violence motivated by monetary gain or personal vengeance. Admittedly, these latter forms of violence often must be dealt with in the same fashion as terrorism for purposes of law enforcement and physical security. Criminal violence can also have political consequences if it is part of a larger erosion of order (as in Russia). And ordinary crime is part of the world of many terrorists, either because they practice it themselves to get money or because they cooperate with criminal organizations.<sup>4</sup> Terrorism is fundamentally different from these other forms of violence, however, in what gives rise to it and in how it must be countered, beyond simple physical

security and police techniques. Terrorists' concerns are macroconcerns about changing a larger order; other violent criminals are focused on the microlevel of pecuniary gain and personal relationships. "Political" in this regard encompasses not just traditional left-right politics but also what are frequently described as religious motivations or social issues. What all terrorists have in common and separates them from other violent criminals is that they claim to be serving some greater good.<sup>5</sup>

The third element, that the targets are noncombatants, means that terrorists attack people who cannot defend themselves with violence in return. Terrorism is different from a combat operation against a military force, which can shoot back. In this regard, "noncombatant" means (and has been so interpreted for the government's statistical purposes) not just civilians but also military personnel who at the time of an incident are unarmed or off duty (as at Khubar Towers or at the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut).

The fourth element, that the perpetrators are either subnational groups or clandestine agents, is another difference between terrorism and normal military operations. An attack by a government's duly uniformed or otherwise identifiable armed forces is not terrorism; it is war. The requirement that nongovernmental perpetrators be "groups" is one point, however, on which the statutory definition could usefully be modified. A lone individual can commit terrorism. Mir Aimal Kansi's shooting spree outside the Central Intelligence Agency was politically motivated, and the four-year manhunt for him was always rightly regarded as a counterterrorist operation. Because there was no indication that he had acted at anyone else's behest, however, his attack never counted in the government's statistics on terrorism. For the present purposes, Kansi and any others like him may be considered one-person terrorist groups.

There is one other respect in which terrorism must be conceived somewhat more broadly than the statutory definition above. Terrorism as an issue is not just a collection of incidents that have already occurred; it is at least as much a matter of what might occur in the future. The threat of a terrorist attack is itself terrorism. Moreover, the mere possibility of terrorist attacks, even without explicit threats, is a counterterrorist problem. Indeed, one of the most vexing parts of that problem concerns groups that have not yet performed terrorist operations (or maybe have not even yet become groups) but might conduct terrorist attacks in the future. There is no good way to record this potential or to quantify it, and it would be pointless to manipulate formal definitions to try to embrace it. But

counterterrorist specialists must worry about it. It is part of the subject at hand.

The conception of terrorism given above excludes some things that have occasionally been labeled as "terrorism" and are themselves significant national security issues—in particular, certain possible uses by hostile regimes of their military forces, such as ballistic missiles fired at civilian populations. To be sure, there are some similarities to terrorism, involving the motivations of the perpetrators, the impact on the target populations, and even the identity of some of the governments involved. These other security issues, however, have their own communities to deal with them, both inside and outside government. The relationships between different security issues must be noted and analyzed, but that does mean expanding the concept of an issue beyond workable limits. Counterterrorist specialists have enough on their plates without, say, weighing into debates on ballistic missile defense.

The concept of terrorism delineated here is not just reflected in a U.S. statute. It is also in the mainstream of what most students of terrorism seem to have in mind, despite their collective definitional angst. Moreover, it also is in the mainstream of what modest international consensus has evolved on the subject, at least the farther one gets from large multilateral debating halls and the closer to rooms where practical cooperation takes place. The latter point is important, given the necessarily heavy U.S. dependence on foreign help for counterterrorism (discussed in chapter 6). It is also important that whatever concept of terrorism the United States uses not be capable of being twisted to apply to actions the United States itself may take in pursuit of its security interests.

About the latter point, two distinctions are critical. The first is the one between terrorism and the overt use of military force. As the world's preeminent military power, it is in the United States' interest to keep that distinction clear, but this is not just a unilateral U.S. interest. The distinction has a broader moral and legal basis, as reflected in international humanitarian law on armed conflict and its rules requiring combatants to identify themselves openly.<sup>6</sup> The second key distinction is between actions that are the willful result of decisions taken by governmental or group leaders, and actions that result from accidents or impulsive behavior by lower-ranking individuals. The latter are bound to happen, and have happened, in incidents involving the United States, just because of the number of circumstances in which U.S. personnel find themselves in which it could happen. One's concept of terrorism must distinguish clearly—as the defi-

inition above does—between, for example, the alleged bombing by Libyan agents of Pan Am 103 and the accidental shooting down of Iran Air 655 in the Persian Gulf by the U.S. cruiser *Vincennes*. Despite the similarities of these incidents (290 people perished in the downing of the Iranian flight in July 1988; 270 people died in the Pan Am incident in December of the same year), and even though Tehran was still calling the Iran Air incident a “crime” more than a decade later, these were fundamentally different events. One was a government’s deliberate use of its agents to murder scores of innocent travelers; the other was a tragic case of mistaken identity by a warship’s crew that believed itself to be in a military engagement.

The place of clandestine agents and subnational groups in the definition of terrorism requires a bit more reflection, because the United States has used many of both. Not only that, but such use has sometimes involved lethal force, and some of that force has caused civilian casualties. But the real question is whether the intentional (that is, premeditated) infliction of civilian casualties through agents or sponsored groups—say, to undermine a hostile regime—is an option that the United States can safely forswear. It is. For one thing, the irregular use of lethal force against civilians would likely be counterproductive, by enabling the targeted regime to rally popular support in the face of a presumed external threat. Just as important, such methods are contrary to what the American public would support as being consistent with American values (a key test to be applied to any proposed covert action, even ones never likely to become public knowledge). Recent operations such as air strikes against Yugoslavia or Iraq have shown the great emphasis the United States has come to place on *avoiding* civilian casualties, even as collateral damage in a conventional military campaign.<sup>7</sup>

The conceptual lines between terrorism and other forms of politically driven violence are blurry. They would be blurry under any definition. The definition given above is at least as clear as any other, but it still leaves uncertainty as to whether certain specific incidents are acts of terrorism. The U.S. government has an interagency panel that meets monthly to consider such incidents (for the sake only of keeping accurate statistics, not of determining policy). The panel debates such questions as whether a particular target or intended target should be considered a noncombatant. Split votes are not unusual.

Good policy on terrorism does not, however, require hand-wringing about how exactly to define it. For the great majority of counterterrorist activities, the late Justice Potter Stewart’s approach toward pornography

will suffice: that it is unnecessary to go to great lengths to define it, because one knows it when one sees it.<sup>8</sup> Even though the U.S. government itself has several other definitions of terrorism written for different purposes, definitional discussions are seldom part of intragovernmental deliberations on the subject, beyond the statistic-keeping panel just mentioned. Lawyers do sometimes have to inject precision about whether certain statutory criteria have been met. This usually revolves around not the meaning of terrorism itself, however, but rather, for example, whether certain conditions (such as U.S. citizenship of the victims) are present that would permit a criminal prosecution. In most situations in which a counterterrorist response may be required, government officials simply recognize terrorism when they see it and do what they need to do. Any uncertainty about whether a given incident is terrorism is due not to semantics but rather to incomplete information.

The blurriness of the definitional lines is a salutary reminder that terrorism is but one form of behavior along a continuum of possible political behaviors of those who strongly oppose the status quo. Alternative forms include other types of violence (such as guerrilla warfare), nonviolent but illegal actions, regular partisan or diplomatic activity, or simple expressions of opinion that never even crystallize into something as specific as a political party, resistance movement, or terrorist group. Sound counterterrorist policy does not focus narrowly only on terrorism itself (however defined) but instead takes into account that terrorists have a menu of other tactics and behaviors from which to choose, and that the conflicts underlying terrorism invariably have other dimensions that also affect U.S. interests.

The distinction between terrorism, as defined here, and other forms of violence by subnational groups is apt to be faint in the eyes of some of the people directly involved. The Muslim fight against Indian control of Kashmir, for example, has been a blend of terrorist attacks against civilians and guerrilla warfare against Indian military forces. At least some of the insurgent leaders recognize the distinction publicly and deny attacking civilians. "We are a legitimate freedom movement," said a leader of one of the larger groups, "and we do not want to be stigmatized with the terrorist label."<sup>9</sup> But attacks in Kashmir against cinemas and parliamentary candidates continue, along with ambushes of Indian army patrols. The course of the conflict in Kashmir, and how each side privately views it, will not depend on the exact proportion of attacks against civilian rather than military targets. Both kinds of attack are unjustified in Indian eyes;

both kinds are part of an overall struggle for self-determination, in the eyes of the militants. The selection of targets has probably depended in large part on such tactical factors as the physical vulnerabilities of the targets and the local capabilities of the groups.

For most Americans, however—and for many others—the distinction between terrorism against civilians and warfare (including guerrilla warfare) against an army entails an important moral difference. The warrior who dons a uniform is understood to be assuming certain risks that the civilian does not, and the guerrilla who fires at someone who is armed and can fire back is not regarded as embracing the same evil as one who kills the helpless and the unarmed. While the United States must be cognizant of the tendency of many to gloss over such distinctions, it should not let the distinctions be forgotten. Its message should be that terrorist techniques, in any context, are unacceptable.

Which gets to the most important point to remember about definitions: terrorism is a *method*—a particularly heinous and damaging one—rather than a set of adversaries or the causes they pursue. Terrorism is a problem of what people (or groups, or states) *do*, rather than who they are or what they are trying to achieve. (If Usama bin Ladin, for example, did not use or support terrorist methods, he would be of little concern to the United States—probably receiving only minor notice for his criticism of the Saudi government and his role in the Afghan wars.) Terrorism and our attention to it do not depend on the particular political or social values that terrorists promote or attack.<sup>10</sup> And counterterrorism is not a war against some particular foe; it is an effort to civilize the manner in which any political contest is waged.

### Why It Matters

Terrorism has many different costs. The direct physical harm inflicted on people and property is the most obvious, but it is by no means the only, or even the most important, cost. It is the most measurable one, in that deaths and injuries can be counted and property damage can be assessed. The significance of even these direct physical costs can be a matter of debate, however, involving disagreements over exactly what should be measured and against what standard the measurement should be compared.

Start with the question of whose casualties to count. In any discussion of U.S. policy, U.S. citizens are clearly the primary concern. Six hundred and sixty-six American citizens died from international terrorism in the