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Terrorism and the Terrors of Definition

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"We live," to borrow the words of J. Bowyer Bell, "in a time of terror." Whatever debates exist over the exact scope and salience of this phenomenon, the emergence of terrorism as a major issue in the contemporary world remains an incontrovertible fact of political life. As Sunday Times defence correspondent Tony Geraghty noted in his introduction to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies survey Ten Years of Terrorism (published in 1979), "Over the last ten years, terrorism in Europe has moved out of the fictitious world of James Bond to become a contemporary problem as ubiquitous as drug abuse and environmental pollution."

Of course, neither the term nor the phenomenon it attempts to reflect is new to the world. Some 900 years ago, the "Society of Assassins," founded by Hassan Ibn Sabah, used the weapon of assassination as a tool of terror: a tool that made the Society "... a powerful force in the Arab world for 200 years...." And, with the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror, the term clearly gained its foothold in history.

Yet the explosion in interest in terrorism qua terrorism is of much more recent vintage. This point is brought home by an examination of the entries in two major, annotated, bibliographic volumes on the subject - one compiled by Norton and Greenberg, the other by Edward Mickolus. In both cases, somewhere between 99.6 and 99.7 percent of the general works cited were published from 1968 on. Little wonder then that Bowyer Bell and others address contemporary history in epochal terms regarding the phenomenon of terrorism.

The attention given terrorism, however, has not been without its frustrations: the primary one of which is the seeming inability to define the term in a universally accepted fashion. Bowyer Bell could label the modern era as "a time of terror," while also arguing "... there is no satisfactory political definition of terror extant or forthcoming, there is similarly no common academic consensus as to the essence of terror and no common language with which to shape a model acceptable to political scientists or social psychologists." "No one," in other words, "has a definition of terrorism." Though the subject has moved out of the shadows onto the center stage of global interest, it continues to lead a penumbra-like existence, definitionally speaking.

To understand terrorism, "one must seek to understand what is happening to whom, where, when, how, why and with what outcomes and effects." There has been no shortage of efforts to link such factors together in definitional packages, only a shortage of agreement as to value of the packages produced. As such, it is not that "no one" possesses a definition of terrorism, but that everyone has his or her own definition of the
phenomenon.

This problem is well illustrated in the single, most comprehensive, published survey on terrorism - the volume *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Data Bases and Literature* by Alex Schmid. In a questionnaire distributed to authors in the field, Schmid, of the Centre For the Study of Social Conflicts at the State University of Leiden in the Netherlands, asked, "Whose definition of terrorism do you find adequate for your purposes?" The highest number of citations went to "no adequate definition" (10), followed by the "my own definition is adequate" response (9). Five definitions were cited by more than one respondent in the survey. E.V. Walter was on the top of this list with five citations. Thomas Thornton, Martha Crenshaw (Hutchinson), Paul Wilkinson, and Brian Jenkins (with Janera Johnson) each had three citations. The United States Advisory Committee on Criminal Justice was cited twice and 22 other sources were cited once by the survey's respondents.

The same questionnaire also asked the participants in the select sample how they felt about efforts to reach commonly accepted definitions "in the field of political violence in general and terrorism in particular." Here, 56 percent of the 50 respondents expressed the view that such agreement was a "necessary precondition for cumulative research."

When the lack of definitional consensus is combined with the perceived need for such consensus in the study of terrorism, the student of the subject appears to face an intractable barrier. Yet that is not quite the case. Though definitional disagreements are abundant, there is, nevertheless, a common image of terrorist activities: an image sufficiently clear to allow data gathering to take place and the data bases produced to gain wide recognition. The Rand Corporation Chronology of International Terrorism and the ITERATE Project (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events) available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research in Ann Arbor represent two such efforts.

In the Rand Chronology, international terrorism is described as "...a single incident or a campaign of violence waged outside the presently accepted rules and procedures of international diplomacy and war. It is often designed to attract worldwide attention to the existence and cause of the terrorists and to inspire fear. Often the violence is carried out for effect. The actual victim or victims of terrorist attacks and the target audience may not be the same; the victims may be totally unrelated to the struggle." For the ITERATE Project, terrorism was operationally defined as "...the use, or threat of use, of anxiety-inducing extra-normal violence for political purpose by any individual or group, whether acting for or in opposition to established governmental authority, when such action is intended to influence the attitudes and behavior of a target group wider than the immediate victims and when, through the nationality or foreign ties of its perpetrators, its location, the nature of its institutional or human victims or the mechanics of its resolution, its ramifications transcend national boundaries." Under ITERATE, international terrorism involves such activity wherein the perpetrators are controlled by states, while in transna-
tional terrorism the perpetrators are essentially autonomous non-state actors.14

Neither the Rand description nor the ITERATE operational definition is without flaws. Still, they have been sufficient to offer reasonable working approaches to data gathering. The reason for this is that despite differing definitions of terrorism, there remains a certain sense of congruence concerning many of the critical elements associated with the phenomenon.

Based on a content analysis of 109 definitions of terrorism, Schmid describes the frequency with which certain elements appear.15 First on the frequency chart is the element of violence/force at 83.5 percent, followed by political intent at 65 percent. An emphasis on fear/terror is the third-ranking element found in over half of the definitions in the sample (51 percent).

The ideas of threat and psychological effects and anticipated reactions are next on the list (at 47 and 41.5 percent respectively). The distinction drawn between the victims and the actual targets of terrorism represents the sixth-ranked element (at 37.5 percent), while purposive/systematically planned action stands as the seventh-ranked element (at 32 percent). Discussions of the actual method of combat/strategy/tactics, the lack of humanitarian constraints linked to the violation of accepted norms of behavior, and the use of coercion/extortion to induce compliance round out the top ten elements in the frequency chart (at 30.5, 30 and 28 percent respectively).

Two added elements - publicity and the act's impersonal/indiscriminate character - appear with frequencies over 20 percent (21.5 and 21 percent). Six more elements fall within the more-than-10-but-less-than-20 percent frequency range. They are: emphasis on the civilian/non-combatant status of victims (17.5 percent); emphasis on intimidation (17 percent); emphasis on the innocence of the victims (15.5 percent); emphasis on a group/movement as perpetrator (14 percent); and emphasis on the act's symbolic/demonstrational dimension (13.5 percent).

The 22 elements in the Schmid frequency chart end with the unpredictability of the act (9 percent), its clandestine nature (9 percent), its repetitive aspect (7 percent), its criminal nature (6 percent) and the demands it places on third parties (4 percent).

Such a checklist does not provide a definition per se. In fact, Schmid notes that the exercise in analyzing the frequency distribution of the elements of terrorism does not lead to "... a true or correct definition of terrorism."16 But if a definition providing for consistent use of the term by all parties remains a chimera, the frequency analysis does point to the central elements connected to terrorism upon which considerable agreement exists.

This agreement provides the basis, then, for Schmid's attempt at definition:

Terrorism is a method of combat in which random or symbolic victims serve as instrumental target(s) of violence. These instrumental victims share group or
class characteristics which form the basis for their selection for victimization. Through previous use of violence or the credible threat of violence other members of that group or class are put in a state of chronic fear (terror). This group or class, whose members' sense of security is purposively undermined, is the target of terror. The victimization of the target of violence is considered extranormal by most observers from the witnessing audience on the basis of its atrocity; the time (e.g. peacetime) or place (not a battlefield) of victimization or the disregard for rules of combat accepted in conventional warfare. The norm violation creates an attentive audience beyond the target of terror; sectors of this audience might in turn form the main object of manipulation. The purpose of this indirect method of combat is either to immobilize the target of terror in order to produce disorientation and/or compliance, or to mobilize secondary targets of demands (e.g. a government) or targets of attention (e.g. public opinion) to changes of attitude or behavior favoring the short or long-term interests of the users of this method of combat.

Schmid's definitional effort gives considerable attention to the target dimension of terrorism (distinguishing victims of violence not only from the actual target of terror but also from targets of demand and attention). It further focuses on the dimensions of purpose and context, and, to a lesser extent, on the acts that differentiate terrorism from other violent activities. Schmid’s approach, however, consciously avoids dealing with motives - a dimension that is often used to separate crusaders from criminals or crazies, and, as such, one that is closely related to the second-ranked citation in his frequency chart, i.e., political intent. This definitional effort also says little about the perpetrators of terrorism, thereby implying that there is no unique attribute of the phenomenon linked to those who carry it out. In this sense, it sidesteps the extremely contentious debate over whether direct or indirect terror used as state policy is indistinguishable from the insurgency or challenge terrorism that has captured international headlines and attention. Similarly, the elimination of a description of perpetrators from the “definition” turns distinctions drawn between transnational terrorism and other manifestations of terror-using and inducing activities into what is, at best, a secondary consideration.

Though there is significant support for the expansive view of terrorism, which blurs such lines under the call for academic objectivity, there are also serious questions about the ultimate utility and value of the expansive approach. Take, for example, Schmid’s discussion of the Reign of Terror. In his words, “Those who had originally supported the draconian measures of Robespierre began to fear for their lives and conspired to overthrow him. They could not accuse him of the Terror since they had declared it to be the
legitimate form of government, so they accused him of 'Terrorism' which had an illegal and repulsive flavour.'"\n
In this context, the switch appears to be nothing more than a game of political semantics in which a negative label is substituted for a positive one. Yet there is more to it than that. The state variable carries with it important implications that should not be readily dismissed. From a judgmental perspective, this does not mean that "thugs" who hold office are somehow better than "thugs" without state positions who wantonly slaughter innocents. The excessive and difficult to justify violence of state terror is neither more nor less moral than anti-state terrorism. But the shared component of "terror" does not mean that it is profitable, in either intellectual or policy terms, to collapse two distinct phenomena into a single category. The boundary maintenance problems involved in the concept of terrorism are severe enough without this type of overextension. Look, for example, at the question of nuclear weapons. In the future, if terrorists of the transnational kind were to gain access to nuclear weapons, would one then argue that such a situation is indistinguishable from the nuclear "balance of terror" that came into existence soon after the end of World War II? Or, quite to the contrary, would one examine common elements while still recognizing the differing conditions that distinguish the two phenomena?

It seems rather obvious that the latter, conceptually narrower path makes considerably more sense than the path of overextension. After all, as Louis René Beres notes in his discussion of a nuclear apocalypse, "...terrorist groups tend to operate under a different meaning of rationality than do states...terrorists are often insensitive to the kinds of retaliatory threats that are the traditional mainstay of order between states."\n
In short, the state variable matters.

Essentially, terror is a tactic that can be utilized in a variety of contexts, for a broad range of purposes, generated by a wide spectrum of motives. Thus terror is a component in many activities. The question then is how much space within a given activity is occupied by this component. In terrorism, unlike its neighboring reference categories (from state terror to guerrilla warfare), the terror component is the preeminent and preponderate component of the whole of which it is a part.

Whatever else is said about terrorism, its almost total concentration on targets of opportunity (i.e., the defenseless) provides it with its special distasteful flavor whether or not one seeks to justify its occurrence.

In his book *Political Terrorism*, Grant Wardlaw reminds us that, "A major stumbling block to the serious study of terrorism is that, at base, terrorism is a moral problem."\n
Different groups, with differing stakes and perspectives, therefore apply or reject the label accordingly. "One man's terrorist," in other words, "is another man's patriot." As Yassir Arafat stated in his 1974 United Nations speech, "He who fights for a just cause, he who fights for the liberation of his country, he who fights against invasion and exploitation or singlemindedly against colonialism, can never be defined a terrorist."

This view, however, mistates the moral dimensions of the subject. It
may be that under a given set of circumstances, an individual or group is entitled to violently break some eggs in order to make a just omelette. But what eggs are chosen and the method in which they are broken are never outside the realm of proper moral judgments. Just cause or not, he who performs acts of terrorism is a terrorist. And because terrorism violates the norms associated with the discriminating and proportional use of violence, it leaves itself open to moral condemnation regardless of its results and its political orientations. 26

In a thoughtful essay on "Motives, Means and Consequences," Joseph Nye, Jr. notes that, "No formula can solve a moral dilemma." 27 In a similar vein, one might argue that no definition can solve the dilemma connected to terrorism when terrorism is seen as a moral problem. Yet this does not mean that no alternative exists to the "terrorist/patriot" cliche. It is possible to avoid "one dimension ethics" and still render meaningful moral judgments. 28 In this regard, judgments need to invoke the multiple dimensions of motives, means and consequences. As a philosophy of means, terrorism is subject to judgment based on means alone. At the same time, the judgment on means may be shaded (but not eliminated) by the consideration of motives and consequences.

Thus we come full circle, back to the question of definition. Without an unambiguous definition, is the use of the term nothing more than an exercise in advocacy, a verdict rooted solely in social judgment? 29 Here it is worth considering a comment made by Potter Stewart in 1964. Seven years after the United States Supreme Court first entered the murkey waters of obscenity, the late justice said this about hard-core pornography:

"I shall not attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I do know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that." 30

In terms of distinguishing the phenomenon in question (hard-core pornography) from related phenomena, Stewart's words clearly fail to offer a sufficiently coherent and constant statement (definition) allowing for a purely logical and rational application of the term in specific and varying circumstances. But despite this definitional barrier, Stewart's "I do know it when I see it" comment should not be viewed as a completely arbitrary or capricious exercise. Stewart, in essence, was dealing with pornography the way Bowyer Bell has dealt with terror, as "...a condition known implicitly to most men, but which is somehow beyond rigorous examination." 31 This implicit knowledge is not a matter of whim, but of agreement (articulated or not) on the critical elements that constitute the core of each activity.

From this perspective, the debate over definition is less significant than the debate over the propriety of the action, that is its morality. Opponents and defenders of pornography do not really disagree over what constitutes the phenomenon. Instead, the debate really centers on its acceptability under given sets of circumstances. Seen in this light, the search for greater definitional finality is "like the anti-hero in a lost generation novel, looking..."
for God in the wrong places."\textsuperscript{32}

Such is also the case with terrorism. Take away the emotive connotations of the term and the definitional disagreements rapidly fade in significance. Ultimately, as a moral matter, terrorism is perhaps best approached in the same way a French peasant spoke in the 16th century of the religious wars in that country: "Who will believe that your cause is just when your behaviors are so unjust?\textsuperscript{33}

No matter what the terrors of definition, that query can never be ignored.
FOOTNOTES

2. Tony Geraghty, “Introduction” in Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, Ten Years of Terrorism (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, 1979), p. 4. The late 1960s represents the time period generally used to mark the beginning of modern terrorism; see, for example, Walter Laqueur’s Terrorism (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), Chapter Five, “Terrorism Today.”
4. Alex Schmid, Political Terrorism (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1983), p. 39. Also, see M. Cherif Bassiouni, “The Origins and Fundamental Causes of International Terrorism” in Bassiouni (ed.), International Terrorism and Political Crimes (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1975), p. 6. There Bassiouni writes of the evolution in the ordinary meaning of the term terrorism since its emergence at the end of the 18th century: “While at first it applied mainly to those acts and policies of governments which were designed to spread terror among a population for the purpose of ensuring its submission to and conformity with the will of those governments, it now seems to be mainly applied to actions by individuals, or groups of individuals.”
9. Schmid, Political Terrorism.
10. Schmid, Political Terrorism, pp. 73-75.
17. Schmid, Political Terrorism, p. 111.
18. Schmid, Political Terrorism, pp. 79-96, offers a detailed examination of such distinctions.
21. Fifty percent of the respondents to Schmid’s questionnaire believed state terror should be included in the term terrorism, Schmid, Political Terrorism, p. 103.
22. Schmid, Political Terrorism, p. 66.
29. See Luigi Bonante and J. Bowyer Bell cited by Schmid, Political Terrorism, p. 7.
32. R. Schroth, review of The Death and Life of Bishop Pike in The New York Times, Book
Review, August 1, 1976, 3.

11Cited by Johnson, Can Modern War, p. 61.