Defining Terrorism: Terrorism in a Contemporary Context

So conceptualizations of terrorism change yet again in the 1980s. And once again, the pendulum swings a bit, but not quite as far as it did in the 1930s, for example. But it does become, once again or once more, associated with governments or with established states. And in the early 1980s, terrorism is seen very much as a phenomena that's orchestrated from Moscow and that's implemented by the former Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact or East Bloc minions as part of a form of shadow warfare against the United States in the West.

And this becomes sort of the dominant interpretation. That it's not so much these individual terrorist organizations that may be radical left wing organizations or revolutionary separatist groups, but rather the view is that all of these entities are controlled or orchestrated or directed by one central conspiracy emanating from the former Soviet Union.

Well, with the weakening of the Soviet Union, the demise of communism towards the end of the 1980s, the conceptualization of terrorism changes yet again. Interestingly, it continues to adhere to its state or governmental dimensions. And terrorism now is seen very much as a form of surrogate warfare, as a form of warfare directed by established nation states against more powerful superpowers or against their enemies.

So in other words, terrorism becomes associated very much with the regime of Colonel al-Gaddafi in Libya, with the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq for example, and it seemed to be this form of surrogate warfare where states are controlling the actual terrorists. In the 1990s, it shifts yet again because, of course, the Cold War is over so Moscow can no longer be behind this. State sponsorship still continues.

In fact, state sponsorship is seen now as also promoting a form of terrorism that really hadn't existed since ancient times, which was terrorism motivated by a salient religious imperative. In other words, where the violence is legitimate or justified on the basis of theological precepts. So this becomes quite common.

The 1990s, however, I think that's a decade very much of confusion where because of the burgeoning narcotics trade in Latin America, particularly in Colombia and Peru, terrorism is associated now with the term narcoterrorism, and it's seen as not being entirely political, but it's also economically motivated. In other words, individuals are engaging in criminal activities on almost a global scale to line their pockets.

In the 21st century, especially after the seismic effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks, terrorism's meaning, I think, interestingly also changes. In fact, we stop using the term terrorism. We talk about a War on Terror. Now this to me is a huge mistake because the "ism" in terrorism
is enormously important. It's that I-S-M that means that terrorism is fundamentally political in character, that it's fundamentally about political change.

When you start talking about something like terror and leave off the "ism," you're talking about an emotion. And after all, that's what terrorists want us to do. They want us to respond emotionally, irrationally to their violence in hopes that they can capitalize on those responses to coerce or to intimidate us. So we have a further muddying of the term where terrorism becomes terror.

And also we have a phenomena where at times in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, you have discussions of how firstly, to wage war against a tactic. If one calls it the war on terrorism. Or else you have discussions about how terrorism, this political phenomena, can be eliminated. You have discussions at almost the highest levels of government in Washington talking about the elimination of terrorism as slavery and piracy were once eliminated as well in the 19th century.

Problem is, of course, is firstly, you can't wage war against a tactic. War on terrorism. Secondly, you can't wage war against an emotion. War on terror. And thirdly, well, point in fact, slavery and piracy, unfortunately and tragically, still exist throughout the world.

So terrorism isn't necessarily a phenomena that can be completely eliminated or defeated either. And I think that's also contributed to our difficulties in defining something like this.