

Defining Terrorism: Fundamental Characteristics

Even if the meaning of terrorism has changed over time, some of the fundamental conceptualizations of terrorism have remained remarkably consistent or constant over the decades. Firstly, terrorists' didactic intention or didactic value. That is the use of violence to educate or to rally the masses.

The use of violence by terrorists to attract attention to themselves and their cause and therefore, to generate publicity that they hope they then can manipulate to extract concessions from government, to intimidate or coerce governments into granting political rights that they might not otherwise have done had they not been confronted by this violence. Or simply to thrust their cause onto the world's agenda. And that's why people often talk about terrorism being symbolic.

That doesn't mean that the victims of terrorism are in any way symbolic. There's horribly mangled bodies, corpses that are the product of terrorism, destroyed property and buildings. Violence and the destruction and death that it causes is very much a part of terrorism.

But this gets to the heart of understanding what terrorism is in that even though it may appear to be irrational, in fact, it's quite deliberate and it's quite specific. It's premeditated in fact. It's the use of violence directed against symbolic targets. In other words, targets that symbolize for the terrorists their enmity towards a government or their hatred of another people or another rival ethnic group. In other words, for them it's not so much the victim that's important as much as, or even the target, as much as the target audience.

And this is why a term, like propaganda of the deed that originated in the 19th century remains such an inherent part of terrorism in that terrorism is a form of violent communication. It's a form of violence used by individuals who could not hope to confront more powerful governments on their own, but instead are using violence and especially the fear and intimidation that comes from that violence to achieve their political aims.

And this is why really in many persons' definitions at the heart of terrorism is the fact that it's directed against innocent civilians. In other words, it's this feeling of vicariousness that almost anyone who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time can become a victim of terrorism. And that's how terrorists seek to spread their fear. And it's also how they seek to intimidate governments into acceding to their wishes. In other words, if you don't agree to what the terrorists want, the violence will continue and more innocent lives will be lost.

Let's turn to the second reason why terrorism has been so difficult to define. And this is actually a very simple and easy one because it's simply that scholars and experts themselves can't agree on a definition. Now if they can't agree on a definition, how can you affect students or the

general public or inform readers to agree on a definition?

I think the problem was very clearly demonstrated during the 1980s, arguably at the height of modern international terrorism. When a survey was conducted of 100 leading experts of the field. And the results? 109 different definitions were provided by these 100 experts, which meant that at least nine of the experts couldn't themselves on their own agree how to define terrorism. So this really, I think, indicates how difficult it is to arrive upon an agreed definition of this phenomenon.

But nonetheless, from those 109 definitions, we can extract some key core concepts that are really the fundamental building blocks in defining terrorism. Now there are over two dozen concepts that these 100 experts identified, but there were only four that at least half of them agreed were the fundamental elements inherent in terrorism.

Firstly, was violence or the use of force. So all definitions of terrorism has to involve violence or the use of force. Secondly, is that terrorism is inherently political. It's about achieving fundamental political aim. And that has been a constant ever since terrorism was first used in its very early origins with the French Revolution in a very different context.

Third is fear or the terror, the anxiety, the concern that this violence generates and that terrorists feel that they're able to manipulate. And then fourth is the threat of still more violence. In other words, the psychological effects or the psychological repercussions of terrorism where terrorism becomes very much this vicarious phenomena where someone reads about a terrorist act even on the other side of the globe. But nonetheless, themselves becomes afraid, becomes concerned, becomes worried.

And that's why terrorism is so closely associated with attacks on innocent civilians because it's something that can happen to anyone. And that's where terrorists seek to harvest or to really manifest the fear that they can then manipulate and use to achieve their fundamental political objectives.