Defining Terrorism: Terrorism vs. Guerrilla Warfare

Let's turn to the last reason why it's so difficult to define terrorism. And this is because in many respects terrorism is used interchangeably with other popular terms, such as guerrilla warfare or insurgency. Yet they all have profound similarities, which accounts for this common usage. But at the same time, I think there are still important distinctions that we have to make.

Now firstly, guerrillas, insurgents, terrorists all employ the same tactics and use many of the same weapons. They rely on shooting, on bombing, on kidnappings, on barricade and hostage situations. So all of them use the same tactics and many of them use the same weapons.

They are also similar in that terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents typically don't wear any uniform or identified insignia. In other words, they blend in with the local population. They're very difficult to distinguish from innocent civilians. In other words, they seek to conceal themselves within a population and therefore, or thereby, emerge from the shadows to suddenly and dramatically strike at their enemies.

But although there may be these similarities in tactics, in weapons, or in the fact that neither terrorists nor guerrillas nor insurgents wear uniform or some identified insignia there's still very important differences. And you can almost view it as part of an escalatory chain where terrorists are at the lowest then there's guerrillas then there's insurgents. In the sense that guerrillas are usually larger in number than terrorists. They control territory, for example, that they can use to train, to establish camps and bases.

They exercise some sovereignty or some form of sovereignty over a population. And I think one of the key distinctions is that they can also engage in force-on-force attacks. In other words, they can operate almost like military bands or military forces and attack defended targets.

Very rarely do terrorists actually attack defended targets. Terrorists resort to putting a bomb somewhere in the middle of the night and then they're miles away when it explodes or to attacking innocent, unarmed people, which is part of their stock and trade whereas guerrillas are better armed, better trained, have territory or sanctuary that they can evade government forces, and also have that territory or sanctuary that they can use as bases to attack superior armies, police forces, even air forces and navies.

Now, guerrillas are, in essence, a step below insurgents. Insurgents, in many respects, are identical to guerrillas. Use the same tactics, control territory, exercise sovereignty over a population. But the key about insurgency is that insurgents are more powerful guerrillas that are able to engage in mass mobilization where they are able to recruit not just a few individuals here and there, not just people in the tens and twenties or even the hundreds, but where they can
mobilize and rally thousands or even tens of thousands of people behind them. In other words, they can engage in guerrilla warfare, as well as in propaganda and mobilization.

Terrorists, because of their small number, because of the fact that they're mostly hiding from the authorities, that they're weak, they don't control territory, they don't exercise any sovereignty, can't do any of the things, for instance, that insurgents can do. This issue of terrorist versus guerrillas versus insurgents is very difficult for governments themselves to understand or to unpack.

For many years, for example, the US State Department has maintained a list of foreign terrorist organizations. And this is the list that Congress bases US laws on, bases sanctions that are taken against these groups. What's interesting is that at any given time at least 1/2 to 2/3 of all the groups on the State Department's foreign terrorist organizations list could just as easily be classified as guerrillas or insurgents.

A group, let's say, like the FARC in Colombia that engages in narcotics trafficking, that certainly is a guerrilla group. It controls territory, large parts of the Colombian forests and mountains are controlled by the FARC. But nonetheless, because the FARC uses terrorist tactics, for example, the State Department classifies them as a terrorist group.

By comparison, let's say historically the famous Red Army Faction in West Germany, what was known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang or the Baader-Meinhof Group was definitely a terrorist group. There was no mistake about that. It was on the State Department's list. It didn't control territory. It didn't exercise sovereignty. So that becomes a clear example.

In terms of other insurgent groups, I think one of the classic examples is Hezbollah Lebanese Shia organization. That clearly started out as a terrorist entity in 1983 with the bombings of the US embassy in Beirut, with the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut as well. But nonetheless, over the years grew larger. As it became larger, became more of a guerrilla force that indeed engaged Israel and the Israel Defense Forces, in guerrilla warfare in Southern Lebanon throughout the 1990s.

And then even in the 21st century has emerged as something of a political power in Lebanon itself where members closely associated with Hezbollah actually are in the Lebanese cabinet. So you see an entity that at one time was very clearly a terrorist organization, today is a dominant political force in a country that may still use terrorist tactics. But nonetheless, often themselves just use the term terrorism. They call themselves a resistance movement. And in fact, in many parts of the world, people abjure or abstain from using the word terrorism to apply to Hezbollah and see it very much as a resistance movement as well.

So what we see is that terrorists differ from guerrillas and insurgents in that they don't function in the open as armed units. They don't seize and hold territory. They don't exercise any kind of sovereignty over a population. And finally, terrorists rarely if ever can engage in mass
mobilization. So even though there are similarities between all three, terrorism is actually quite unique.