

Are the Definitions of Terrorism Impeding Meaningful Research of the Subject?

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Abstract

To be useful in meaningful research of a topic and offer viable solutions to solving problems, definitions of the terms must be clear. If we cannot agree on the definitions of a problem, how can we expect to explain it? Many scholars agree that our definitions of terrorism are too dissimilar and often confusing. This confusion has created a vacuum of basic empirical research on terrorism. Jenkins (1980) distinguishes that a primary factor in terrorism research problems lies with a precise definition of terrorism. Jenkin's study for the Rand Corporation concludes "The term terrorism has no accurate or widely accepted definition (p. 1).

Archetti (2013) concludes that any definition (including the purposive use of the label to suit a political agenda) is inevitably biased, ritually repeating the same points contributes very little to advance our understanding and that terrorism research lacks the development of theoretical frameworks (p.14).

Keywords: defining terrorism definitions, state-sponsored, politically sponsored, agreement, politicization, empirical research, interdisciplinary research

Section One

Defining terrorism

An examination of only a few standard definitions of terrorism demonstrated how complicated and varied the task is. Each nation has its interpretation based on the views of their governments' leaders, often resulting in a myriad of explanations. Some explanations are short while others are quite long an attempt to capture every possible situation and circumstance.

Nation-states view themselves as autonomous entities, and as such look to be free of any outside force designed to change their political structure, a method of governance or normative values. Each nation defines terrorist and terrorist organizations from a mindset steeped in the tradition of sovereignty and autonomy. Even though those nations may have used terror tactics themselves to gain freedom, once set up they looked to keep autonomy and self-preservation. As is clear from a review of the selected definitions above, each one relates to some degree or another to governments and politics.

Conflicting Definitions of Terrorism

Jacobson (2013) argues "... the word terrorism constantly appears in newscasts, congressional debates, and speeches by world leaders, often as a way of securing public support for one security measure or another" (p.1). This confusion manifests itself in a multitude of U.S. government definitions. He notes the U.S. State Department includes attacks on noncombatant targets, to deliberately include cafes and other facilities frequented by off-duty military personnel, including military installations that are not in the middle of the military action.

The FBI addresses attacks against abortion clinics, medical research facilities, and businesses accused of harming the environment. The Defense Department places more emphasis on a threat rather than actual violence and cites explicitly religious aims as its rationale (p.2).

State Terrorism, unlike political terrorism, seems to lack a distinct political goal, other than to hold on to power. Golder and Williams (2004) describe the two main drafting methods used to define terrorism as the general and the specific approaches. The approach identifies specific activities like terrorism, such as hijacking and taking hostages, without seeking to define a general category of terrorism per se, while the general approach seeks to arrive at a general definition of terrorism, by reference to criteria such as intention, motivation, and so forth. The former is an inductive approach, while the latter is deductive (p.1).

Examples of Conflicting/confusing Definitions of Terrorism

There exist countless definitions of terrorism, seemingly developed and suited to the needs/desires of the authors. Examples below are some definitions used by Intelligence and law enforcement agencies in the U.S. as memorialized in a CIA Security Brief, of April 8, 2014.

The U.S. Code of Federal Regulations defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (28 C.F.R. Section 0.85).

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Definition of Terrorism

The Intelligence Community is guided by the definition of terrorism contained in Title 22 of the US Code, Section 2656f(d):

- The term "terrorism" means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.
- The term "international terrorism" means terrorism involving the territory or the citizens of more than one country.
- The term "terrorist group" means any group that practices, or has significant subgroups that practice, international terrorism.¹

U.S. Department of Defense

The U.S. Department of Defense recently changed its definition of terrorism. Per Joint Pub 3-07.2, Antiterrorism, (24 November 2010), the Department of Defense defines it as "the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies. Terrorism is motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs and committed to the pursuit of goals that are usually political."

The new definition distinguishes between motivations for terrorism (religion, ideology, etc.) and goals of terrorism ("usually political"). This definition is in contrast to the previous definition which stated that the goals could be religious.

U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency]

The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) contains a definition of terrorism, which reads:

Terrorism is the use of force or violence against persons or property in violation of the criminal laws of the United States for purposes of intimidation, coercion, or ransom. Terrorists often use threats to:

- Create fear among the public.
- Try to convince citizens that their government is powerless to prevent terrorism.
- Get immediate publicity for their causes.

The new definition does not require that the act needs to be politically motivated. The FEMA also said that terrorism "include threats of terrorism; assassinations; kidnappings; hijackings; bomb scares and bombings; cyber-attacks (computer-based); and the use of chemical, biological, nuclear and radiological weapons" and also states that "[high-risk targets for acts of terrorism include military and civilian government facilities, international airports, large cities, and high-profile landmarks. Terrorists might also target large public gatherings, water and food supplies, utilities, and corporate centers. Further, terrorists are capable of spreading fear by sending explosives or chemical and biological agents through the mail."

U.S. National Counterterrorism Center

The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) define terrorism the same as United States Code 22 USC § 2656f(d)(2). The Center also defines a terrorist act as a "premeditated; perpetrated by a sub-national or clandestine agent; politically motivated, potentially including religious, philosophical, or culturally symbolic motivations; violent; and perpetrated against a noncombatant target."

U.S. National Security Strategy

In September 2002, the U.S. National Security Strategy defined terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence against innocents." This definition did not exclude actions by the United States government, and it was qualified some months later with "premeditated, politically motivated violence against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

USA PATRIOT Act of 2001]

The USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 defines domestic terrorism as "activities that (A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the U.S. or of any state; (B) appear to be intended (1) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S."

Terrorism Risk Insurance Act

Section 102(1)(a) of the Terrorism Risk Insurance Act contains a definition of terrorism in order for insurance companies to provide coverage to all prospective policyholders at time of purchase and to all current policyholders at renewal and requires that the federal government pay 90 percent of covered terrorism losses exceeding the statutorily established deductible paid by the insurance company providing the coverage. It reads:

(1) ACT OF TERRORISM-

(A) CERTIFICATION- The term 'act of terrorism' means any act that is certified by the Secretary of the Treasury, in concurrence with the Secretary of State, and the Attorney General of the United States.

(i) to be an act of terrorism;

(ii) to be a violent act or an act that is dangerous to--

(I) human life;

(II) property; or

(III) infrastructure;

(iii) to have resulted in damage within the United States, or outside of the United States in the case of--

(I) an air carrier or vessel described in paragraph

(5)(B); or

(II) the premises of a United States mission; and

(iv) to have been committed by an individual or individuals as part of an effort to coerce the civilian population of the United States or to influence the policy or affect the conduct of the United States Government by coercion.

The FBI

The FBI describes terrorism as either domestic or international, depending on the origin, base, and objectives of the terrorist organization. The FBI uses the following definitions:

□ Domestic terrorism is the unlawful use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a group or individual based and operating entirely within the United States or Puerto Rico without foreign direction committed against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.

□ International terrorism involves violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or any state, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or any state. These acts appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping. International terrorist acts occur outside the United States or transcend national boundaries regarding the means by which accomplished, the persons they appear intended to coerce or intimidate, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum.

U.S. Department of State (DoS) Definition of Terrorism

Section 2656f(d) of Title 22 of the United States Code defines specific critical terms used in Section 2656f(a) as follows:

1. the term “international terrorism” means terrorism involving citizens or the territory of more than one country;
2. the term “terrorism” means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents; and the term “terrorist group” means any group practicing, or which has significant subgroups which practice, international terrorism.

U.S. Codes

18 U.S.C. § 2331 defines “international terrorism” and “domestic terrorism” for purposes of Chapter 113B of the Code, entitled “Terrorism”:

“International terrorism” means activities with the following three characteristics: Involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law; Appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S., or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate or coerce, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum.*

“Domestic terrorism” means activities with the following three characteristics: Involve acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law; Appear intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S.

18 U.S.C. § 2332b defines the term “federal crime of terrorism” as an offense that: Is calculated to influence or affect the conduct of government by intimidation or coercion, or to retaliate against government conduct; and Is a violation of one of several listed statutes, including § 930(c) (relating to killing or attempted killing during an attack on a federal facility with a dangerous weapon); and § 1114 (relating to killing or attempted killing of officers and employees of the U.S.).

*FISA defines “international terrorism” in a nearly identical way, replacing “primarily” outside the U.S. with “totally” outside the U.S. 50 U.S.C. § 1801(c).

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Definition of Terrorism

Under Section 2 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002:

(15) The term “terrorism” means any activity that— (A) involves an act that— (i) is dangerous to human life or potentially destructive of critical infrastructure or key resources; and (ii) is a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or other subdivision of the United States; and (B) appears to be intended— (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.

U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Definition of Terrorism

The calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological.

It takes only a cursory examination of some of the definitions to realize confusion, duplication, and political influence. Of the U.S. law enforcement/intelligence agencies referenced above, four different U.S. codes are referenced. They are Title 18 USC 2331, Title 28, CFR 0.85, Title , 22 USC 2656f(d), and Title 50 USC . Some U.S. agencies have created their definitions. The paramount question is why? Why are there so many coded U.S. definitions and not just one? Even an Insurance Act liability and legal actions are involved. Federal Emergency Management (FEMA), has a stake in the game too.

Academic Definitions of Terrorism

Academic definitions fare no better. As related in a SECBRIEF described by Chris,(2014).

Alex P. Schmid

“...terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassination—the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought.” (p.3).

Brian Jenkins

“[Terrorism is]...the use or the threatened use of force designed to bring about a political change.” (p.3).

Bruce Hoffman

“By distinguishing terrorists from other types of criminals and irregular fighters and terrorism from other forms of crime and irregular warfare, we come to appreciate that terrorism is

- ineluctably political in aims and motives;
- violent—or, equally important, threatens violence;
- designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target;
- conducted either by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia) or by individuals or a small collection of individuals directly influenced, motivated, or inspired by the ideological aims or example of some existent terrorist movement and/or its leaders; and
- perpetrated by a subnational group or nonstate entity.

We may therefore now attempt to define terrorism as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change. All terrorist acts involve violence or the threat of violence. Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a broader “target audience” that might include a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general. Terrorism is designed to create power where there is none or to consolidate power where it is very little. Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence, and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale.” (p.3).

Jeffrey M. Bale

“Terrorism is the use or threatened use of violence, directed against victims selected for their symbolic or representative value, as a means of instilling anxiety in, transmitting one or more messages to, and thereby manipulating the attitudes and behavior of a wider target audience or audiences.” (p.3).

Marc Sageman

“Until recently, a large part of the literature on terrorism concentrated on definitions of terrorism, but without reaching consensus on what that definition is. Thus, we have the common refrain that one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist and the suspicion that, if the word had existed at the time, the British authorities would probably have branded our founding father's terrorists. Of course, most people know what they mean by terrorism, but it is a little like obscenity: people believe they know it when they see it but cannot define it. Even the United Nations does not have a definition for terrorism.” (p.3).

Martha Crenshaw

“Terrorism]is a conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behavior of multiple audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the attention of the many.”
(SECBRIEF, April 8, 2014).

Section One Summary

The U.S., and academics, all have problems with the definition of terrorism. They only address the acts of terrorism and are quite diverse in that. All, however, render that what constitutes terrorism and or terrorist actions, are directly related to the government of that nation and its protection from outside violence. None mention or refer to state sponsored terrorism. Kuznetcov & Kusnetcov (2013) elaborate when examining the Russian definition of terrorism “As we can see, different states’ can differ from each other because it sets its own definitions without any outer legal boundaries” (p. 132).

The underlying problem with each government agencies definitions are threefold. First, they are written separately by each agency with no apparent consultation with other agencies. Second, they are written to fit into existing criminal codes and third (enforced by those agencies) and third, they are seemingly written by lawyers and not based on academic research or the consultation of academic disciplines.

Academic definitions fare no better. Jenkins definition is simple, force or threat of force to inspire political change. Hoffman is very elaborate and covers politics, violence, and an operational chain of command. Hoffman even throws in psychological effects for good measure. Schmid emphasizes the psychological condition of anxiety, as a significant factor. Bale involves not only anxiety as a factor but adds the concept of symbolism. Sageman attempts to relate the definition of terrorism with an analogy of obscenity and prophets that most people know what they mean by “terrorism.” Do they? With so many varieties of definition in existence, how can meaningful and purposeful research be conducted? Crenshaw offers that terrorism is a “conspiratorial style of calculated violence” in a dichotomy of terms. She reifies it is propagated to alter the attitudes of many, but target few. What few and what attitudes?

Section 2

Do conflicting definitions of terrorism impede influence academic research?

The primary question concerning definitions is that do they somehow impede, influence objective, unbiased research, aimed at discovering solutions to our most pressing global problem.

Sageman (2014) summarizes that there is a stagnation in research on terrorism which is caused by failed government strategy. He criticizes this strategy for spending millions on funding research without sharing primary source information with academia. “This has created an unbridgeable gap between academia and the intelligence community” (p. 565). It has also caused an explosion of speculations with a little empirical grounding in academia.

Silke (2001) evaluates that research seeks to create knowledge through meaningful research. If a marked absence of conceptual agreement and a wide variety of diverse views characterize research, an inability hampers it to make predictions of future events (p. 2). He conceptualizes that research on terrorism has been laboring under this dogma for 30 years. Silke concludes that “The field shows little evidence that it is capable of leaping to consistently producing research of absolute explanatory and predictive value (p.3). He explains that the reasons are due to, the inability to access the actors (terrorists) in a systematic nature, an emotive nature to terrorism which has precluded objective research concerning how they view the subjects and its members.

Researchers of terrorism view themselves as “firefighters” putting out the terrorist fire. They should view themselves as “a student of combustion” (p.3). The result of this belief is that is that government policy concerns and agendas drive research of terrorism. He assesses that 1995 through 1999, most of the terrorism sources for use in research stemmed from Documentary Analysis/Review. Specifically, data got from secondary data analysis and more specifically, from archival records. Only 10 percent stemmed from interviews either structured or unstructured (p.5). Of that 10 percent, only about 4 percent of the interviews focused on the information provided by the interviewer. Silke’s further analysis of that 4 percent reveals that only 1 percent of the discussions are systematic or structured (p.5).

Archetti (2013) supports the claim that many have lamented the fact that the field of terrorism studies lacks engagement with theoretical frameworks (Crenshaw 1981, 1991; Tarrow 1995: vii; Silke 2004b; Cronin 2006). Leonard Weinberg and Louise Richardson (2004: 138) openly state that “the study of political terrorism has largely been an a-theoretical undertaking.” (p. 12).

Archetti cites Andrew Silke (2004d: 207) who found that in the 1990s less than two percent of all articles published in the two leading journals within the field, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, addressed conceptual issues and the situation does not appear to have changed to this day (p.13). Archetti acknowledges that “most conceptual debate seems to be absorbed by defining terrorism. Given that the discussion, whether in an article or the introduction of a book, invariably ends with an acknowledgment that “one’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” (p. 13). Archetti concludes that any definition (including the purposive use of the label to suit a political agenda) is inevitably biased, ritually repeating the same points contributes very little to advance our understanding and that terrorism research lacks the development of theoretical frameworks (p.14).

In Chapter 2, Archetti (2013) explained that despite the volume of research the field does not overall offer a satisfactory explanation for the terrorism phenomenon regarding causal processes. We may know a great deal about the chronology and planning of single attacks, about the tactics of specific groups, the contents of organization’s manifestos and extremist ideologies, the background and life stories of individual terrorists. Indeed, we even know what kind of perfume one of the hijackers wore before he embarked on his last mission in the early hours of 11 September 2001. We can easily download Al Qaeda training manuals (US Department of Justice n.d.); get a good idea of the contents of the group’s latest magazine in English, *Inspire* (Ambinder 2010; Joscelyn 2011a,b) read about the way an ordinary Muslim became a radical in Ed Husain’s *The Islamist*, to name just one memoir.

But beyond this ocean of minutiae, why does terrorism exist? How does it arise? How does it develop? Why does it end? This claim might sound odd considering that there are many well-known works precisely addressing these questions (Archetti,2013 pp.13,14).

Desmarais et al. (2017) realized that after a review of 205 articles of contemporary scientific literature on terrorism research, that 50 articles reported on findings of empirical research, 24 reported inferential statistics and 6 of these compared characteristics of known terrorists to non-terrorists.

Horgan & Boyle (2008) dispute the current formulation of Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS). They admit that some form of critical studies in the field of terrorism research is needed but concede that although the... “terrorism scholars try to be as independently minded as possible and test for the robustness of findings based on different definition of data, but the basic problem-that terrorism studies is ineluctable political remains” (p.52). The authors interpret that until now, studies of terrorism should be dubbed “Orthodox Terrorism Studies” and as such are characterized by poor methods and theories, its state of centrality, its problem-solving orientation, and its institutional and intellectual links to state security projects (p.53). Because of these problems, the authors feel that the study of terrorism seeks to support a status quo bias reflective of how to solve problems for those in power (p.53).

Reinares (2012) suggests that terrorism studies should include more academic disciplines and not merely as a social science sub-discipline, but an inter-disciplinary field where History, Anthropology, Sociology, Criminology, Political Science, Psychology, Economics, and other academic disciplines. Each with their own - at times overlapping - traditions, methodology and learned corpus, coalesce in a mutually enriching exchange on problems concerning terrorism and counterterrorism. This exchange is thus based on their different theoretical, analytical, and empirical perspectives (Reinares, p.1).

Section 2 Summary

Many researchers of terrorism agree that current definitions can and do affect empirical based real efforts and obstacles to objective research. The Politicization of the term terrorists and the pejorative attitudes surrounding those definitions have precluded scientific inquiries. Moreover, government strategies have limited educational access to terrorists and have obviated qualitative based studies from reaching full potential.

Shuurman(2018) reveals several anecdotal problems which have not changed in thirty years. “There is a long tradition of self-criticism within the literature on terrorism that began soon after the field’s emergence in the 1960s and 1970s Bell lamented that there were “no agreed definitions, no accepted bounds to the subject, no very effective academic approach, no consensus on policy implications “ (p. 2). Shuurman notes several researchers like Schmid and Bell who believe “... much of the writing [on terrorism] is impressionistic, anecdotal, superficial and at the same time often also pretentious, venturing far-reaching generalizations on the basis of episodic evidence.” (p. 3).

Section 3

Conclusions

Possible solutions to redirect terrorism studies

Schuurman (2018), points out that methodological problems of research still plague academic endeavors. He elaborates that “...the definitional debate on what exactly terrorism constitutes terrorism continues to exert a detrimental influence on the field’s development” (p.3).

Schuurman also contends that many individual papers written by scholars rely on the secondary sources developed by the media which are generally the first to investigate terror attacks. He notes that such reliance can be problematic since “... media-based sources present potential problems with regards to factual accuracy, editorial bias and the underreporting of failed or foiled terrorist attacks” (p. 5).

If meaningful, predictive and analytical research on terrorism is to overcome the pejorative attitudes, and the governments failed strategies in order to enter the realm of meaningful and objective research, certain avenues must be explored, and roadblocks removed. There must be created:

1. A generally accepted definition of terrorism agreed upon by all U.N. nations
2. Avenues for academic researchers access to terror participants
3. Academic research of a truly interdisciplinary nature.

Definitions of terrorism are dependent on the governing bodies influenced by terrorism and those fearful of terror attacks. The definitions relate directly to the political and social norms of those nations. This does not preclude the possibility that a meaningful, objective and precise definition is impossible. It merely means that a focus on creating such a definition needs to be addressed.

Because of the security first mindset of governments (and rightfully so), access to a captured terrorist for academic purposes will remain difficult. However, alternative roots can be employed which at least offer comparable data with which to apply to terror groups and their members. Decker & Pyrooz (2014), offer that the studies of gangs, their structure, recruitment and the causal participation of their members are an excellent secondary avenue.

One academic field cannot claim ownership concerning terrorism studies. Instead, it must be an interdisciplinary cooperative effort by a garden variety of disciplines, working together to find answers.

If researchers cannot apply an accepted agreed upon definition of a subject, do not have adequate access to the researches population and cannot entertain and apply interdisciplinary resources to the problem of terrorism, it is unlikely that it can be helpful in eradicating this growing menace.

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