

# Towards A Critical Analysis of Misconceptions of Terrorism

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## Abstract

*Misconceptions of terrorism are detrimental to managing its challenges. When the 'what' and 'who' of terrorism are not clearly understood then its solutions become ineffectual having attendant implications including the heightening global insecurity, anguish, etc. All these are counterproductive to social stability and development. To reverse this trend, time and resources that could have been ploughed to progressive ventures are lost to counterterrorism efforts. Prevalent philosophical analyses in terrorism discourse is at two levels, namely; conceptual (what is terrorism?) and moral (can terrorism be justified?). While not downplaying the moral issues in terrorism, this paper focuses on exploring the conceptions of terrorism. We consider three issues, firstly the conception of state actors and violent non-state actors, secondly the mode of equating acts of terror with the concept of terrorism and thirdly some implications therefrom. The paper argues that the concept of terrorism is the direct perpetuation of violent non-state agents against states through attacks on noncombatant citizens. Such acts are sometimes indirectly aided by states thereby complicating global insecurity. We call for concerted efforts to disarm violent non-state groups and create avenues for dialogue where discords can be managed without resort to violence.*

*Keywords: terror, terrorism, state agents, violent non-state agents*

## Introduction

Understanding of the concept of terrorism is important because it clears the path to dealing with its challenges. Such understanding clearly defines who a terrorist is and what the terrorist claims. This point will be clarified later in the course of our analysis based on definitions of terrorism. The controversial nature of terrorism raises hard-to-resolve questions. For instance, should it be perceived as the action of a group against a state or should it be understood as the action of the state against recalcitrant citizens or groups? Is terrorism the act of a stronger state against a weaker one in an attempt to exert influence? Noreen van Elk (2016) aptly points out that although research on terrorism has increased immensely in the post-9/11 era, the definitional problem as well as the implications thereof seems not to get the necessary attention. These points raised by van Elk are the focus of this paper. We proceed with the contention that terrorism is better understood as the direct

perpetuation of violent non-state agents (VNSA) because of their illegitimate use of force mostly against soft targets. According to Charles Webel (2004:9), “terrorism, and terrorists, which derive from the perpetuation of terror, have become relativized in recent times, since there is very little consensus on who, precisely, is, or is not, a terrorist, or what is, or is not, an act of terrorism.” A considered conceptualization of terrorism has the promise of aiding humanity in considering some misconceptions associated with different views of terrorism. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on definitions of terrorism while the second part discusses issues arising from these definitions with specific interest on the role of state and non-state agents. The third part looks at some implications arising therefrom and shows how overcoming them portends global security.

### Defining Terrorism

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994:85) “all concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning.” The problems connected to the concept of terrorism include existential threats and global insecurity; and rethinking the notion of terrorism is instructive to addressing concrete issues emerging from the act. The term terrorism, says Dipak Gupta (2008:7), “has been a source of confusion, contradiction, and controversy from the first time it slipped into our political vocabulary.” The word itself, he notes, “was coined during the terrible days of the French Revolution. From this beginning, the word had different meanings for different people.” The meanings given to concepts are a result of our ability to define. Aristotle, as cited by Tamar Meisel:

...observed long ago, that our definitional powers are essentially linked to our ability to distinguish good from evil. The gift of speech, Aristotle tells us, goes beyond the physical capacity to utter sounds and even the ability to recognize and name objects in the physical world. The essential attribute of human speech, is captured by the ability to differentiate, categorize, and define a variety of incidents as belonging to a common genus, while excluding others. It is the capacity to distinguish and define which enables us to make ethical judgments (Meisel, 2008:10).

The turn of the century increased the focus on terrorism. According to Asta Maskaliunaite (2002:36) “in the end of 1970s, terrorism appeared in the considerations of politicians and social scientists as one of the global problems but the events of September 11, 2001 made it an even more important phenomenon, the eradication of which became one of the purposes of the strongest state of the world. But today terrorism is on the front burner of interdisciplinary studies.” On defining terrorism, Andrew Silke (2004:3)

contends that the various definitions range from the absurdly over-specified to the unacceptably over-generalized. Scholars define terrorism from two main perspectives; the agent-neutral and the agent-centered. Agent-neutral definitions focus on the 'act' of terrorism while agent-centered definitions focus on perpetrators and the act of terrorism.

Fritz Allhoff (2012:5) conceives terrorism as "the intentional use of force against noncombatants or their property to intentionally instill fear in the hopes of realizing some ideological aim." Igor Primoratz (2004:24) also defines terrorism as "the deliberate use of violence, or threat of its use, against innocent people, with the aim of intimidating some other people into a course of action they would not otherwise take." Timothy Shanahan (2016:239) submits that terrorism is "the strategically indiscriminate harming or threat of harming members of a target group in order to influence the psychological states of an audience group in ways the perpetrators anticipate may be beneficial to the advancement of their agenda." These definitions are agent-neutral, they focus on the act, the goal, and the effect of terrorism without recourse to who is responsible for these acts. This is an overly general perspective of conceptualizing terrorism allowing the inclusion of individuals, groups or even states that engage in the noted acts of terrorism.

Let us see another set of definitions: C.A.J Coady (2004:21) defines terrorism as "a political act, ordinarily committed by an organized group, which involves the intentional killing or other severe harming of noncombatants or the threat of the same or intentional severe damage to the property of noncombatants or the threat of the same." The CIA defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (CIA, 2014). According to Brenda Lutz and James Lutz:

Terrorism involves political aims and motives. It is violent or threatens violence. It is designed to generate fear in a target audience that extends beyond the immediate victims of the violence. The violence is conducted by an identifiable organization. The violence involves a non-state actor or actors as either the perpetrator, the victim of the violence, or both. Finally, the acts of violence are designed to create power in situations in which power previously had been lacking (i.e. the violence attempts to enhance the power base of the organization undertaking the actions) (Lutz and Lutz, 2008:9).

Omar Lizardo (2008:102) also states that "modern terrorism refers to a type of violent interaction initiated by a non-state actor, which is not formally recognized as a legitimate wielder of the means of violence or a valid initiator of violent interactions, directed against the representatives (human,

material or symbolic) of a formally recognized state actor in the international system, which does not follow the institutionalized rules and conventions of military engagement." These definitions are agent-centered mostly focusing on the non-state agent as the perpetrators of terrorism. This conception is contentious because there are scholars who strongly hold the view that states are guiltier of terrorism than non-state agents.

### **Misconceptions of Definitions**

Two misconceptions of terrorism are argued in this paper namely: the 'state actor' versus 'non-state actor' controversy and the 'act of terror' versus 'concept of terrorism.' Are both the state and VNSA equally guilty of terrorism? Are acts of terror the same as the concept of terrorism? Or is the state guilty of committing acts of terror while VNSA are guilty of terrorism? These conceptions are intertwined and will be so discussed but we contend that response to the first two questions is negative while the third is positive. Neil Englehart (2016:172) notes that "non-state armed groups are very diverse; what unifies them as an analytical category is their capacity to use organized violence without the official sanction of a public authority." VNSA are a regular phenomenon in contemporary nation-states. Their activities are inimical to state security and social stability. All of these groups, says Englehart, share a common attribute: they can use organized violence, something normally reserved to the sovereign state, without being subject to public authorization or accountability.

What differentiates the activities of VNSA from that of state agents is the lack of legitimacy. States have the legitimacy to use force but how such force is used is an entirely different issue. As Chidozie Okoro (2008:49-50) points out, "conflict is inherently human due to the fact that nothingness lies deep in the heart of man and has the tendency of manifesting as insecurity if not channeled towards constructive use." Just as VNSA unleash violence, an insecure leadership can unleash terror on opponents or the citizens to assert itself. The actions of leaders cannot be termed as terrorism but rather as acts of terror. Walter Laqueur (1987:146) asserts that "acts of terror carried out by police states and tyrannical governments, in general, have been responsible for a thousand times more victims and more misery than all actions of individual terrorism taken together." For instance, when the military rulers of Argentina caused thousands of their suspected opponents to 'disappear' in order to spread fear among other potential dissidents (Held, 2008:16) or when government embarks on a campaign of killings 'disappearances' and torture of opposition elements in order to instill fear in the opposition forces as a whole, and thus put an end to the 'insurrection' (Suemas Miller 2009:39). But

when non-state actors engage in such acts, it is terrorism. States legitimacy to use force removes the indictment of terrorism from it but does not free them from the wrong of using terror acts against enemies domestic or foreign.

If we conclude that states cannot be guilty of terrorism because of legitimacy to use force, are they totally innocent of terrorism? No. States can be indirectly guilty of terrorism. The expectation of states to act within internationally recognized rules of engagement in war, else they be charged of crimes against humanity, make them sponsor non-state agents in achieving certain goals. Jason Thomas (2018) writes that, "China's reclamation and militarization of artificial islands within the South China Sea presents a significant strategic focal point from which to consider the use of non-state actors, not only to take territory, but to defend and if required attack... The beginning of China's moves to claim these seas and area around these Islands began through the use of fishermen." China is noted to have the largest armed non-military fishing fleet (or fishing militia) in the world. The direct invasion of these Islands would have sparked uproar against China but an indirect motivation and use of fishermen went without incident. Moreover, since the fishermen are Chinese citizens, China can directly defend when they are threatened. The argument that while non-state actors like Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, ISIL can be directly accused of being guilty of terrorism, state actors can be indirectly guilty of terrorism as is the case of Russia and Ukraine. Alexander Motyl (2014) asserts that, "there is overwhelming evidence of Russia's direct and indirect involvement in the violence that rocked several eastern Ukrainian cities on April 12-13... the weapons and uniforms worn by the terrorists are of Russian origin. In light of Russia's direct and indirect promotion of international terrorism in eastern Ukraine, Russia obviously qualifies as a 'state sponsor of terrorism'.

Terror acts (misconceived as terrorism) is the direct practice of states. The term terror according to Weibel (2004:9) "denotes both a phenomenological experience of paralyzing, overwhelming, and ineffable mental anguish, as well as a behavioral response to a real or perceived life-threatening danger." The Jacobins terrorized the French population just as is the practice of modern governments. Citing the actions of the Allied forces during WWII, Primoratz (2013:37) writes that "in the night of July 27-8, 1943, the RAF carried out the second of its four raids on Hamburg, known as the Firestorm Raid. In the morning, when the attack itself and the gigantic firestorm it created were over, some forty thousand civilians were dead." Likewise, millions of deaths were caused by state-instigated mass murder, forcible starvations, and genocide in the twentieth century (Blakeley and Raphael, 2016:340). Jackson *et al* likewise write that:

... during the twentieth century, modern states were responsible for the deaths of 170 million to 200 million people outside of war, a great many of them murdered during notorious campaigns of state terrorism... During the great wars of the twentieth century, millions of civilians were killed in atomic attacks and 'terror bombing' campaigns designed specifically to undermine morale and intimidate into submission – a case of randomly killing some people in order to influence others, which is the essence of the terrorist strategy... (Jackson et al, 2010:1).

Acts of terror by Israeli forces against Palestinians, numerous counterterrorism acts that have left several people dead, maimed, injured, homeless, displaced, devastated are just a few state acts of terror that have claimed lives, destroyed properties and left innocent civilians terrified than any terrorist act by VNSA. When a state goes beyond conventional warfare and target noncombatants who are protected under all rules of war, then it moves into the realm of asymmetric warfare which is wrong.

The above definitions of terrorism have been looked at from the several perspectives which terrorism is studied and they all affirm that having an all-inclusive definition of terrorism is difficult if not impossible. A consistent and unbiased definition of terrorism will benefit everyone: because it will be harder to wage unjust and possibly disastrous 'wars on terror,' because it will be harder to capitalize politically on hyping up the threat from terrorism, and because it will be harder to justify why states should be allowed certain kinds of political violence while non-state actors are not (Anne Schwenkenbecher, 2012).

In the end, a proper conceptualisation and contextualization of terrorism is essential for managing the problems that evolve from it. Terrorism is better understood as an organised form of violence by non-state agents to draw the attention of the state to their goal. The legitimacy of the state to use force gives it the right to some level of violence to ensure order in the society, fend off imminent threat or protect its territorial integrity. There, of course, is a limit to this use of force and it is unacceptable when such force is deployed for selfish interest of the rulers, this will be tantamount to terror.

### **Implications**

Terrorism engenders a state of insecurity and insecurity impedes social development. Security is always the first resort of humans at the expense of every other thing. Terrorism creates insecurity in the environment and not being able to truly define terrorism makes it difficult to tackle terrorism. Understanding terrorism is always a first step so that aspects of terrorism will not be focused on in the name of dealing with terrorism. Jim Unah

(2002), while pointing out the cause of persistent conflict in metaphysics writes that, “the practice of magnifying an aspect of reality as the totality of reality, the practice of expanding an aspect of being and insisting that it is the whole of being or being itself has created confusion in the house of being.” We can thus argue that the practice of defining aspects of terrorism as what terrorism itself is creates confusion in understanding and managing it. Issues or elements in terrorism which should be considered when attempting to define it include the act, the actor the motive and motivations, and the victim. When overbearing attention is focused on a particular element at the expense of other elements in the act, then there is bound to be problems. When who an innocent victim is, is not well spelt out, then there would be problems. When which acts can really pass as terrorism is not well defined, then there are bound to be problems. This notation of Unah aptly describes some consequences of terrorism which in turn affects the stability and development of the society. From a socio-economic developmental perspective, Todd Sandler and Walter Enders (2008) write that:

Terrorist incidents have economic consequences by diverting foreign direct investment (FDI), destroying infrastructure, redirecting public investment funds to security, or limiting trade...Terrorism, like civil conflicts, may cause spillover costs among neighboring countries as a terrorist campaign in a neighbor discourages capital inflows or a regional multiplier causes lost economic activity in the terrorism-ridden country to resonate throughout the region... Terrorism also raises the costs of doing business in terms of higher insurance premiums, expensive security precautions, and larger salaries to at-risk employees (Sandler & Enders 2008:18).

Writing from the angle of fear which terrorism causes, Samuel Scheffler (2006) says this may, for example, erode confidence in the government, depress the economy, distort the political process, reduce associational activity and provoke destructive changes in the legal system. Its ability to achieve these effects derives in part from the fact that, in addition to being intrinsically unpleasant to experience, the fear that terrorism produces may inhibit individuals’ participation in a wide range of mundane activities on which a polity’s social and economic health depends.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) at the occasion of the Global Dialogue on Rule of Law and Post 2015 Development Agenda avers that while the links between conflict, violence, insecurity and development are complex, there is little doubt that violence acts as a development disabler. Noting the effects of insecurity on Nigeria, Sam Ogege (2013:86) says “people are no longer free to go about their economic activities

for fear of being killed... The overall implication for sustainable development is that the economy is fast deteriorating... insecurity problems have caused a greater percentage of the internal resources and attention to be devoted only to the security sector.”

Fear caused by insecurity from terrorism brings to the fore the reason for the establishment of the state according to Hobbes. The fate of nasty, brutish and short life existent in the state of nature is synonymous to the fear caused by terrorism and this hampers the development of the society. It is difficult to find willing investors in terrorism prone areas and resources will be wasted in the counterterrorism efforts. Scheffler (2006) thus submits that it is *only* within a stable political society that the miserable condition of unremitting fear can be kept at bay. Such stability is more likely to engender development.

### Conclusion

This paper argued that misconceptions of terrorism have hampered attempts at managing the challenges arising from terrorism. One of the challenges in the conceptions of terrorism discussed in this paper was each account cannot be universalized. This is an attempt at limiting the understanding terrorism. We stressed that since assumed perpetrators are either state agents or non-state agents, then an agent neutral definition is not acceptable. State has legitimate power to use force, whereas non-state agents do not. While some rulers, as state agents, unleash terror acts, which are motivated by either right or wrong motives against citizens and opposition alike, non-state agents typically adopt terrorism to draw attention to their goals. There is the need for concerted efforts to deal with the challenges of terrorism.

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