Chapter 2
Understanding Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

People all over the globe have become very familiar with the term terrorism due to its common and worldwide occurrence. Terrorism has been committed by states, governments, organizations, groups, and individuals throughout its long history. Despite the large number of definitions by governments, global institutions, academics, politicians, security experts, and journalists, there has been no single universally agreed-upon definition of terrorism so far for a variety of reasons. This chapter critically analyzes discussions and definitions of terrorism in an attempt to contribute to a fair and balanced understanding of terrorism. It discusses how subjectivity has been an obstacle in understanding terrorism due to the pejorative nature of the term. Debates around the highly contentious concept of terrorism in terms of its distinctive nature, motivations, goals, and means in comparison to other forms of violence are discussed, and several definitions of terrorism are analyzed. It is evident that obtaining public attention is the ultimate aim of terrorism in relation to communicating specific messages and both the use of and by the media. While definitions of terrorism struggle to demonstrate exhaustive lists of descriptions, traits, components, conditions, and elements of terrorism, disagreements on these definitional items and features create ambiguities in understanding terrorism. The chapter, then, concludes with discussions on eliminating controversial and subjective definitional items and features to introduce a definition that can help provide an objective understanding of terrorism.

RECOGNIZING THE DILEMMA

Nearly everyone across the globe has become familiar with the word “terrorism” (Bankoff, 2003), given the fact that almost every day a terrorist incident occurs somewhere in the world (Kupperman, van Opstal, & Williamson, 1982). In a broad, yet vague, understanding, the word “terrorism” can be applied to numerous social relations and interactions. For example, “men terrorize women; adults terrorize children; humans terrorize animals; and soon” (Bergesen & Lizardo, 2004, p. 38). However, this understanding is far separate from tactics of terrorism used by states, organizations, groups, and individuals that are motivated by specific predetermined agendas.

State terrorism (against a state’s own people) and state-sponsored terrorism (against the people
of another state) have occurred throughout the long history of terrorism. Governments “may use their legal apparatus and even their military forces to terrorize segments of their own populations” (Jaggar, 2003, p. 176). While nations (e.g., Iraq, Syria, and Iran) have been repeatedly accused of involvement in state-sponsored terrorism, some wars (e.g., the U.S. 2003 war on Iraq) have also been seen as acts of state terror (e.g., Combs, 2013; Eid, 2008). Terrorist organizations require the support of networks able to fund activities in regions outside conflicts; hence, there exist an international network of groups that cooperate informally and formally with each other in many ways, such as ideological and theological alliances; organizational assistance; propaganda and psychological warfare; financial help; recruitment support; intelligence sharing; supply of weapons; operational activities; and availability of sanctuaries (Alexander, 2006). Terrorist groups and individuals carry out activities that range from playing support roles (e.g., fundraising; lobbying through front institutions; coercing, intimidating, and manipulating communities; and propagating hate) to planning and preparing terrorist attacks (e.g., procuring weapons and materials and abusing regulations).

Terrorism is international; so has to be counterterrorism. A helpful step towards a universal cooperation among nations of the globe in the prevention of terrorism is an agreement on a common definition; however, the United Nations has been struggling to provide a definition that is accepted by all nations (Bruce, 2013). The United Nations produced an interim draft definition in 2001, which down-plays political justification and lists acts of violence as terrorism if they are “resulting or likely to result in major economic loss, when the purpose of the conduct, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organisation to do or abstain from doing any act” (cited in Bruce, 2013, pp. 26-27). In 2010, the Head of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate said that “the fact that there was not a universal definition of terrorism presented a challenge . . . nations are hampered by an inability to define and criminalise terrorism” and this remains a problem in achieving transnational counterterrorism (Bruce, 2013, p. 27).

The fight against terrorism seems to be as hard as the attempt to define it. International institutions and scholars have acknowledged the struggle to define the highly contentious concept of terrorism (e.g., Chakravorti, 1994; Coady, 2004; Devine & Rafalko, 1982; Ganor, 2002; Gibbs, 1989; Hoffman, 2006; Poland, 2005; Ruby, 2002; Schmid & Jongman, 2008; Teichman, 1989). Despite the comprehensive discussions in the literature of defining terrorism, a consensus on an appropriate definition is still far from reach. Well-established global institutions, academics, politicians, security experts, and journalists have defined terrorism, focusing on various angles; however, there has been no single fully or universally agreed-upon definition of terrorism. Many explain that the concept of terrorism is difficult to define (e.g., Atran, 2003; Davis et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2006; Ganor, 2002; Oberschall, 2004; Schmid & Jongman, 2008; Symeonidou-Kastanidou, 2004; Waldron, 2004).

The attempt to define the term terrorism is faced with various difficulties, including its: long history; various and different forms or tactics; pejorative nature; polemical and rhetorical use; and rapidly changing nature. Walter Laqueur explains that it is “so difficult to find a generally accepted definition” of terrorism because: 1) “only things which have no history can be defined” but terrorism “has had a very long history”; and 2) “there has not been a single form of terrorism, but many, often with few traits in common” (2000, p. 6). Terrorism also holds negative connotations to which nobody would desire to be attributed (Copeland, 2001). The use of the term “is often polemical and rhetorical;” it “can be a pejorative label, meant to condemn an opponent’s cause as illegitimate rather than describe behavior” (Crenshaw, 2000, p. 406). The nature of terrorism