

## Concept of Terrorism: Some Definitional Crises

*Naeem Ahmed\**

### **Abstract**

*In the modern political usage, 'terrorism' has become the most controversial term to be defined objectively. This controversy is magnified when it comes to the notion of 'one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. In this process, another difficulty is which forms of violence should be recognized as legitimate and which should not. In other words, the subjectivity of the term has not only exacerbated the threat, but also made it more sinister than it has been in the past.*

*In the presence of such emerging threats, it is necessary to evolve a working definition with little disagreement. Although it is extremely difficult for the nation states to compromise over their national interests, still there must be some starting point because there is almost a consensus among the states that the modern transnational religious terrorism is a major threat to world peace and stability.*

*Undoubtedly, academics' works on terrorism have helped understand the problem, but their contributions have not even materialized to create a consensus among the political circles. The academics themselves are divided on the very particulars of the concept.*

*In my opinion, the distinction between 'freedom fighting' and 'terrorism' must be made on the grounds of the legitimacy of the movement for independence, recognized by the UN. Article 1(2) of the UN Charter recognizes the right of self-determination of the peoples.*

*This article is an effort to highlight the complexities in defining terrorism, and to find out some ways to reach at least a partial consensus among states. The article is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the definitional problems as far as the term 'terrorism' is concerned. In the second part an attempt has been made to distinguish between 'terrorism' and 'freedom fighting'. The third part focuses on the changing meaning and nature of terrorism over a period of time. And the*

---

\* Dr. Naeem Ahmed is Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, Pakistan.

*last part discusses some practical approaches to reach a partial consensus over the definition of 'terrorism'.*

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of terrorism has become a major concern of the international community. It is elevated to the foremost foreign policy problem of the states. The new and faster modes of transportation and communication technologies have made it easier for the terrorists to reach their targets and strike them without any difficulty. This has magnified the threat of terrorism and made it more sinister than it has been in the past.

Today, terrorism has become far more brutal and indiscriminate and the governments are helpless in responding to this menace. The terrorist groups nowadays are well organized in their cadre, well equipped in their resources and well-connected through the modern channels of communications with one another all the world over.<sup>1</sup> The terrorists are convinced that the indiscriminate use of violence is justified if it serves their religious or political objectives. For them, there are no innocents and non-combatants, serving and achieving their cause is more important.

Terrorism is a complicated concept<sup>2</sup> and any meaningful definition seems very difficult to be agreed upon by the international community because of the political, socio-economic and personal interests. Even a regional consensus on the definition of terrorism is difficult to achieve. Analysts face difficulty when it is considered that some forms and classes of terrorism are justifiable whereas others are not.<sup>3</sup> Any precise definition which can provide a meaningful analytical framework is hard to achieve because of the lack of consensus.

This article is an attempt to highlight the problems in defining the concept and the nature and purpose of terrorism keeping in view the changing trends and introduction of modern tactics in perpetrating terrorist activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Panna Kaji Amatya, 'International Terrorism: Threat to Global Security', *Journal of Political Science* (Katmandu), 1999, p.69.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mathieseu, 'Expanding the Concept of Terrorism', in Phil Scraton (ed.), *Beyond September 11: An Anthology of Dissent* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.85.

<sup>3</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics and Counter-Measures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.4.

### Problems in defining terrorism

Who will define terrorism? A victim state or a society, a stronger state, any international or regional organization, or the super power? Terrorism is a relative term and expresses different meanings to different people: for Israel it is terrorism when a suicide bomber blows himself up in a market place; to the Palestinians, it is terrorism when Israeli troops bulldoze a house or shoot stone-throwing kids. India views Pakistan sponsored militancy in Kashmir as terrorism; on the other hand, overwhelming majority of the Kashmiris calls it freedom fighting and call the use of brutal force by the Indian troops as state terrorism.

Many efforts have been made at the global level to achieve consensus on the precise definition of terrorism. These efforts which date back to the League of Nations' convention in 1937 could not materialize. The UN and its agencies have long been involved in defining terrorism, but have failed to reach a consensus.

The resolution of definitional problem is necessary for tackling the menace of terrorism. Although the literature on terrorism offers plenty of definitions, most of them give a very narrow vision of the concept of terrorism. Terrorism is sometimes properly or sometimes improperly used as a synonym of rebellion, insurrection, guerrilla warfare, coup *d'état*, civil strife, or any of many other related terms that produces fear or terror. Most of the times, such lackadaisical and random use of the term may make the understanding of the specific meaning and nature of terrorism more murky and difficult.

The failure of achieving a meaningful definition of terrorism has made many respectable national and international revolutionary figures terrorists. Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Yasser Arafat of Palestine, Bhagat Singh of India and Che Gueverra of Cuba are cases in point. Nelson Mandela himself has provided perhaps the most satisfying answer to the perennial question. Pointing out that many people once described as terrorists are leading governments today, Mandela says:

When you succeed—people are prepared to accept you and have dealings with you as head of state. You become a terrorist if your aims and objectives fail.<sup>4</sup>

### Academic debate

While some view terrorism in political terms, others insist that it should be defined in legal terms, still some relate it with morality. Undoubtedly, academics' works on terrorism have helped in understanding the

---

<sup>4</sup> Afzal Mahmood, 'Many Faces of Terrorism', *Dawn* (Karachi), 26 July 2003.

problem, but their contributions have not helped in creating a consensus among the political circles. The academics themselves are actually divided on the particulars of the concept.

Steven Spiegel defines terrorism as the use of violence by an individual or group, designed to create extreme anxiety in a target group larger than the immediate victims, with the purpose of coercing that group into meeting certain political demands.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Mathieseu views terrorism as violent and arbitrary action consciously directed towards civilians, with a political or ideological goal more or less clearly in mind.<sup>6</sup> James Lee calls terrorism a highly charged political term used by most people to refer to political violence (or any other political tactics) of which they disapprove.<sup>7</sup>

Grant Wardlaw explains 'political terrorism' as a sustained policy involving the waging of organized terror either on the part of the state, a movement or faction, or by a small group of individuals.<sup>8</sup> Richard Overy considers that terror is not an organization or a single force. It is related to a variety of political confrontations, each of which has to be understood in its own terms.<sup>9</sup>

Walter views terrorism as a 'process of terror' having three elements: the act or threat of violence, the emotional reaction to extreme fear on the part of the victims or potential victims, and the social effects that follow the violence (or its threat) and the consequent fear.<sup>10</sup>

Leonard Weinberg labels terrorism as a politically motivated crime intended to modify the behavior of a target audience.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>12</sup> views similarly and considers it a political crime against society.

Jessica Stern sees terrorism in the light of the changing times and political environment. During the French Revolution, its character was

---

<sup>5</sup> Steven L. Spiegel, *World Politics in a New Era* (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995), p.475.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Mathieseu, *op.cit.*, p.85.

<sup>7</sup> James Lee and Juliet Kaarbo, *Global Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), p.466.

<sup>8</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.13.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Overy, 'West's display of power exacerbates terror threat', *Dawn*, 21 March 2004.

<sup>10</sup> E.V.Walter, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence with case studies of some primitive African communities* (New York: OUP, 1969), p.5

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Weinberg and Paul Davis, *Introduction to Political Terrorism* (New York: McGRAW-Hill, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> See Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* (New York: Avon Books, 1986).

revolutionary. In the Cold War period, the focus was on the surrogate warfare, where the communist regimes were held responsible for the promotion of terrorism. In the post-Cold War era, the religious extremist groups with ideological orientation got the international attention. The September 11 incident has characterized terrorism as transnational with religious orientation.<sup>13</sup>

In all the definitions the term is denoted with political aspect. This means that terrorism is sophisticated violence, politically exploited by a group or organization with a religious, ideological or ethnic appeal. Political biases, however, increase difficulties in defining the term because of its subjective nature. The subjectivism is captured in a popular saying that 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. Terrorism as such is a calculated tactic of the weak against the strong and established authority. The problem is that how could one get out of this relativist enmesh? This aspect in defining the term has made the task more difficult.

Martha Crenshaw<sup>14</sup> opines that revolutionary violence and terrorism are two different phenomena and should not be confused with each other. The activities of freedom fighters cannot always be termed as 'terrorism', because their target is the repressive government. But again the problem is that freedom fighting is itself a subjective phenomenon. The same freedom fighter is a terrorist for the other. While Crenshaw views terrorism as a socially and politically unacceptable violence, which aims at an innocent symbolic target to achieve psychological effect, she tries to narrow down the broader perspective of the term 'terrorism'.

John Gearson raises some pertinent questions: What, if anything, is legitimate dissent using violent means? When is being a freedom fighter acceptable?<sup>15</sup> It is very difficult to label any group a terrorist. The problem arises when that group becomes the part of the negotiation process. The definition rests, then, on moral justification. But, in fact, the proper study of terrorism should seek to explain a phenomenon, not

---

<sup>13</sup> Jessica Stern, *The Ultimate Terrorists* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.13.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Crenshaw (ed.), *Terrorism, Legitimacy and Power* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> John Gearson, 'The Nature of Modern Terrorism' in Lawrence Freedman (ed.), *Superterrorism: Policy Responses* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p.10.

justify it. And it must be realized by all that explanation does not entail justification.<sup>16</sup>

William May argues that terrorism carries an important dimension outside the realm of political discourse, namely, an ecstatic element. To the extent that the ecstatic element predominates, the exercise of terror may become an almost religious experience for the terrorists with the production of emotional concomitants becoming a primary motivating force.<sup>17</sup>

Some intellectuals try to define terrorism in legal terms and consider it a criminal act. J. Dugard notes that when a person commits an act which threatens the stability of other states or undermines the international order, he ceases to be a political offender and becomes a criminal under international law, like the pirate or hijacker.<sup>18</sup> But Jonathan R. White argues that the problem with legal definitions of terrorism is that they account for neither the social nor political nature of terrorism. Violence is the result of complex social factors that range beyond narrow legal limitations and foreign policy restrictions. Political violence often occurs during the struggle for legitimacy. This implies that someone or some groups must have the power to label opponents. Groups can be labeled as terrorists whenever their opponents have the authority to make the label stick. Thus, legal definitions do not account for all the problems associated with terrorism.<sup>19</sup> The political notion in any terrorist activity cannot be discarded, which, again, becomes the major source of confrontation to reach an international consensus on the term.

Some experts suggest that behavior of the terrorists must be observed with the situational change to predict their responses. But Grant Wardlaw dissents that for a definition to be universally accepted it must transcend behavioral description to include individual motivation, social milieu and political purpose.<sup>20</sup> He further argues that the term terrorism cannot be used as a behavioral description because it will always carry the flavor of some moral judgment.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.54.

<sup>18</sup> J. Dugard, 'Towards the Definition of International Terrorism' in *Proceedings of the American Society for International Law*, 1973, No. 67, p. 98.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan R. White, *Terrorism: An Introduction* (California: Brooks, 1991), p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

Jonathan R. White views similarly by arguing that the behavioral approaches do not fully explain terrorism. The behavioral theories of terrorism are politically biased that they are used to deny the legitimacy of certain causes. If a proponent of a cause can be labeled a terrorist, the cause itself comes into question.<sup>22</sup>

So, there has always been confusion in defining the term and reaching a consensus. Paul Wilkinson, to some extent, clarifies the continual confusion in understanding the term. According to him:

These ambiguities and contradictions should warn us against any premature general theory or model of the causes, inception and development of terrorism. For in reality there are many terrorisms, each calling for different theories, models and approaches from the scholar seeking to relate these phenomena to other dimensions of political change. Therefore the primary tasks must be: to clarify and refine the concept of political terrorism; to establish a working typology of political terrorism; and, most difficult of all, to relate terrorism to other modes of violence and to the basic political values, structures and processes of liberal democracy.<sup>23</sup>

All the above definitions exclude state terrorism. More often state terrorism is not termed as 'terrorism.' It is considered necessary to suppress any uprising from any non-state actor. It has the legitimacy and people support it. It is institutionalized form of terrorism and becomes more dangerous when it aims to wipe out the opposition.

### **State terrorism**

There appear to be two distinctive goals associated with state terrorism: repression and mobilization. Incumbent political regimes have used terrorism as a means of repressing elements in their populations they view as a threat, real or imagined, to the continuation of their rule.<sup>24</sup> It is the common practice of states. The history is full of the tragic incidents, where state, instead of protecting its citizens, has unleashed reign of terror and has become responsible for their annihilation. The fact is that the state terrorism has killed more people as compared to terrorism by non-state actors.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan R. White, *op.cit.*, p.113.

<sup>23</sup> Quote in William L. Waugh, Jr., *International Terrorism: How Nations Respond to Terrorists* (North Carolina: Documentary Publications, 1982), pp.24-5.

<sup>24</sup> Leonard Weinberg and Paul Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.14-15.

Amalendu Guha emphasizes that the recent use of power hegemonism by certain global nations, can be regarded as 'state terrorism', in the sense that its symptoms, behavior and actions as well as effects are, either the same, or, similar to the terrorism launched by fundamentalist beliefs or ideologies. Both are anti-human, anti-social and frightful.<sup>25</sup>

Many states use and sponsor terrorism as a form of proxy war against target 'enemy' states. It is very easy for a state to support terrorists and carry out low-level surrogate warfare against a powerful enemy state, as the former cannot afford an open and direct confrontation with the latter. In this situation, it also becomes easy for the weaker state to deny its involvement in any conflict with the superior state. When a state provides its full tacit support to a group to fight in an adversary state to destabilize it, this policy always backfires and its reflection can be seen in the society where the terrorist groups become too powerful to control. The result is that the terror from above replaces the terror from below.

From 1960 to 1990, the worldview on terrorism was of the state-sponsored terrorism, which resulted in the misunderstanding of the problem of terrorism. Rather it further complicated the issue with time. Terrorist organizations which were once supported and funded by the states have become independent in terms of their finance and resources and do not need any state support. Their main issues are: fundamentalism, deprivation, political frustration, regional disparities, marginalization of sub-national groups, extremism, despair, injustice, and intervention into personal freedom.<sup>26</sup> They have now vehemently started propagating their ideology which was once propagated by the state through these organizations. Consequently, the propagation of ideology through non-state actors has started threatening the very foundations of the state itself. Therefore, those groups or organizations which were backed by the state have now become great monsters.

### Historical perspective

Perhaps the term terrorism is the most controversial one in the modern political usage. The study of the problem has faced the dilemma of emotionalism and relativity. Emotions profoundly affect the responses to terrorism. For a large portion of the audience such violent behavior is

---

<sup>25</sup> Amalendu Guha, 'Redefining Terrorism: Preventive and Combative Measures,' The Graduate Institute of Peace Studies, Kyunghee University, Republic of Korea, XVII: 29 (Winter 2003), p.19.

<sup>26</sup> Panna Kaji Amatya, *op.cit.*, p.72.



beyond their comprehension, beyond their experience and understanding. For those people, terrorism is abhorrent, abnormal, and psychotic.<sup>27</sup>

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. With the passage of time its nature has continuously been changing. Its origin can be traced back as religious when the Zealot-Sicarii, Jewish group, revolted against Romans during the first century A.D.; then the Assassins in Persia and Syria during the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; the Thugs in India for almost six centuries, and afterwards the Christians during the Middle Ages in Europe. All were religiously inspired movements in which terrorism was used as a tactic to achieve religious and political goals.

With the emergence of the nation state system after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the nature of terrorism started to change. The secular motivations found their way to inspire both the potential terrorists and the state itself. This changing nature of terrorism could be seen in the shape of revolution, anarchism,<sup>28</sup> and nationalism during the preceding centuries.

Important point to note is that the rise of modern terrorism in the West is linked to the struggle for freedom in the western World. In the 1700s and early 1800s, most Europeans did not enjoy freedom, and America was still only an experiment. A change in social perceptions and actions, however, revolutionized the system and structure of western governments. Many forms of violence accompanied the struggle for democracy; terrorism was one of them.<sup>29</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of nationalist movements, which struggled against the colonial powers for the self-government. Though the nationalists adopted violent means to achieve their objectives, unlike anarchists, they considered themselves freedom fighters. Anarchists were socially isolated, but the nationalists could hope for the possibility of greater support. Governments labeled them terrorists, but nationalists saw themselves rather as unconventional

---

<sup>27</sup> William L. Waugh, Jr., *op.cit.*, p.3.

<sup>28</sup> It was a philosophy which emphasized the possibilities of human freedom and the ability or potential capacity of people to live in harmony with one another without the need for a formal government to coerce them into obedience. They denied nationalism or any allegiance to the state, which was considered as an oppressive institution to protect the rich and their freedom at the expense of the poor. So, their purpose was to destroy such a repressive institution and its proponents through revolutionary violence. Leonard Weinberg and Paul Davis, *op.cit.*, p.27.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan R. White, *op.cit.*, p.55.

soldiers fighting in a patriotic war. They opted only the tactics of anarchists.<sup>30</sup>

During the inter-war period, a new form of political terrorism emerged in Europe, known as 'Right-wing terrorism'. The purpose of this terrorism was to preserve the status quo. Leonard Weinberg observed two factors which contributed to the emergence of Right-wing terrorism in Europe. First, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917 encouraged the other socialist movements in many European countries that the same kind of revolution could be possible in their own societies. So, these intentions were perceived a great threat by the governments and various societal elements in those countries, which wanted to preserve the previously existing system. Second factor was the rise of fascist movements, particularly in Italy and Germany. They were extremely nationalist and anti-communist in nature and justified violence for their own cause.

In the United Kingdom, the Right-wing terrorism could be seen in the form of Irish Republican Army (IRA), which, in opposition to the partition of Ireland, launched terrorist campaign in Ulster and in England during the inter-war period.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood employed nationalist terrorism during the 1930s against the British sympathizers. In Palestine, the British mandatory area, the Zionist terrorist organizations, the Irgun and the Stern Gang, launched terrorist campaign against the British after the issuance of the White Paper, which restricted the Jewish immigration in Palestine in 1939. Some Arab groups, who were against the Jewish settlement in Palestine, also violently responded to the anti-Semitism at the appeal of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem during this period.

The dominant form of violence in the post-War period which aimed at either de-colonization or social revolution was rural-based guerrilla warfare.<sup>31</sup> The major success stories were those of Mao-Tse-tung in China, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and Fidel Castro in Cuba. But there were also less publicized failures. Guerrilla insurgencies were defeated in Greece, Malaya, and the Philippines. In some of these instances, both the successful and unsuccessful, terrorism was used by those groups pursuing national liberation (Vietnam) or social revolution (Greece).<sup>32</sup>

During 1960s and 1970s, the world witnessed this sudden upsurge in the form of Left-wing terrorism. This confused the experts on

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard Weinberg and Paul Davis, *op.cit.*, p.33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

political terrorism, who saw terrorism as a new and unprecedented phenomenon, something that was essentially a response to injustice.<sup>33</sup> This meant that the focus was on to address the root causes of terrorism, which could be political, economic, social or religious grievances.

Another phenomenon the world vulnerably witnessed in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the internationalization of terrorism when the PLO hijacked an airliner in 1970. This transcendence of national boundaries, though secular and local in nature, encouraged the other organizations, both secular and religious, in the forthcoming years to use similar tactics and organize themselves both at the regional and global level. The culmination of this aspect can be seen in the transnational character of religious terrorism in 1990s. Al-Qaeda is an example of it. The transnational groups are either supported by states or have their own financial resources.

International terrorism is, thus, an offshoot, the newest branch in the evolution of modern revolutionary and guerrilla warfare theories. It elevates individual acts of violence to the level of strategy (and therefore denounced by orthodox Marxists as adventurism). It denigrates conventional military power by substituting dramatic violence played for the people watching. It violates the conventional rules of engagement: it reduces the category of innocent bystanders. It makes the world its battlefield: it recognizes no boundaries to the conflict, no neutral nations.<sup>34</sup>

Many researchers are of the opinion that the terrorists usually avoid using Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to achieve their goals. There are various reasons for that. For instance, they lack technical proficiency; are morally restrained and do not want to be detected by the authorities. The politically motivated terrorists do not want to be alienated from the society and do not want to lose their support either.

On the other hand, Jessica Stern claims that the terrorists, more likely to attempt to use WMD, are groups with amorphous constituencies, including religious fanatics, groups that are seeking

---

<sup>33</sup> Walter Laqueur, 'Left, Right, and Beyond: The Changing Face of Terror' in James F. Hoge, Jr. and Gideon Rose (eds.), *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and The New War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., 2001), p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> B.M. Jenkins, 'High Technology Terrorism and Surrogate War: The Impact of New Technology on Low Level Violence,' *The RAND Paper Series*, No. 5339, January 1975, p. 8.

revenge and groups that are attracted to violence for its own sake.<sup>35</sup> They have no moral constraints, because they consider that they are the saviors of the innocent people, who are threatened by an evil. So, their aim is to eliminate the evil by using lethal force against it. In this regard, they have no concern of the sufferings of the innocent people, who become victims of both terrorism and government's retaliation against those culprits. She also views that these constraints will not apply if the group is pursuing chaos, or if it is confident of its ability to remain anonymous or evade law enforcement.<sup>36</sup> According to her, anonymity would serve three purposes: it would protect the group from retaliation or arrest, it would prevent public backlash against the group, and it would increase social chaos.<sup>37</sup>

### Modern terrorism

The world has now entered a 'new age of terrorism'<sup>38</sup> as the terrorists are equipped with deadly weapons and sophisticated technology at their disposal with religious orientation. The emergence of new actors, new adversaries, new weapons and new tactics has changed the nature of terrorism.

In today's terrorism, religious impulses play a significant role. Hoffman estimates that almost half of the numbers of today's terrorists have religious motivations. According to him, while religion and terrorism do share a long history, until the 1990s this particular variant had largely been overshadowed by ethnic and nationalist-separatist or ideologically motivated terrorism. Indeed, none of the 11 identifiable terrorist groups<sup>39</sup> active in 1968 (the year marking the advent of modern, international terrorism) could be classified as 'religious.' Not until 1980 in fact—as a result of the repercussions from the revolution in Iran the year before—do the first modern religious terrorist groups appear: but they amount to only two of the 64 groups active in that year. Twelve years later, however, the number of religious terrorist groups had increased nearly six-fold, representing a quarter (11 of 48) of the terrorist organizations who carried out attacks in 1992. Significantly, this trend not only continued, but accelerated. By 1994, a third (16) of the 49 identifiable terrorist groups could be classified as religious in character or motivation. In 1995, their number increased yet again, to account for

---

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Stern, *op.cit.*, p.70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.

<sup>38</sup> John Gearson, *op.cit.*, p.7.

<sup>39</sup> See *RAND Chronology of International Terrorist Incidents*.

nearly half (26 or 46 per cent) of the 56 known terrorist groups active in that year. Thus, by the middle of the decade, the rise of religious terrorism was clear.<sup>40</sup>

The ideology and cause of the terrorist group or organization attracts the potential terrorists to join it. Many researchers believe that terrorists are normal human beings with no mental disorder. They always consider them right and blame others for the existing problems. They join the group consciously, and change themselves considerably by offering complete allegiance to the group mission, follow rules of the group and show unconditional loyalty to the cause. A continuous indoctrination of the terrorists for the cause and importance of the mission is very vital, where terrorists are reminded that their lives are worthless and must be sacrificed for the greater cause. The assertiveness of Islam, combined with demands for socio-political justice, becomes more dangerous when religious fanatics for their own interests exploit it. Their program is based on the revival and expansion of Islamic values all over the world. To legitimize their global political agenda, they invoke the idea of *jihad*.

In the Christian world, the concept of crusades has disappeared a long time ago, whereas in the Muslim world the idea of *jihad* has been revived with a misunderstood connotation. It is even against their own Muslim rulers. For example, Syed Qutub, the Egyptian Islamic radical, believed that the existing Arab regimes should be overthrown first because only then would a *jihad* be successful.<sup>41</sup>

Presently, suicide bombing has become a common practice to carry out terrorist activities. The spiritual leader of Hezbollah, Syed Mohammed Fadlallah justified the suicide missions, proclaiming that it is the weapon of weak. There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself.<sup>42</sup> But he fails to justify the suicide bombing against the innocent civilians in a market place. The reason for this misuse of the concept is simple: most fundamentalists are lay people who lack intimate knowledge of Islamic sources and who politicize Islam to justify their activities. Therefore, there is a great need for a historical analysis of the place of scripture in Islamic tradition.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Lessons of 9/11* (Pittsburgh: RAAND, 2002), p.3.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Laqueur, *op.cit.*, p.77.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Jessica Stern, *op.cit.* p.85.

<sup>43</sup> Bassam Tibi, 'War and Peace in Islam' in Sohail H. Hashmi (ed.), *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.179.

Suicide bombing in the name of God and indoctrinating the young people in fanatic belief and act that such martyrs would live, after self-murder, in the eternal garden of God for such holy act of sacrifice and holy war, is not only non-argumentative irrationality, but a crime of exploiting the emotion of the young to promote the idea of self-destruction.<sup>44</sup>

All the divine religions forbid suicide bombings. No rationality and justice and ethics-based religion, civilization, culture or value suggests and opts for terrorism to obtain and create these goals. Only the blind and brain-washed individuals or sections of human beings regard terrorism as the means of attaining their irrelevant faith-based goals.<sup>45</sup>

Religious persuasions may act as enabling agents but religion, as such, does not produce suicide terrorists. Many are secular-minded men and women are moved not by spiritual but political goals, such as freedom from foreign occupation, or alien ethnic domination.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the suicide bombing is not only common in Muslims, where they even kill themselves in the desire for a divine reward; it was also found in the Japanese *Kamikaze* and the Germans SS units, who volunteered themselves to undertake suicide missions at the end of the World War II when the defeat of the Axis Powers seemed imminent. The LTTE in Sri Lanka has, in fact, the most skilled, dedicated and volunteer cadre to commit suicide attacks.

In the contemporary world, the phenomenon of terrorism has become very complex and technical, and many new trends have been introduced, which have made it hard to reach a world consensus on the definition of the term. Attempts have also been made to distinguish terrorism types by the nature of their goals: terrorism may, in such a view, be seen simply as an end in itself or as a means to a given end. It may equally have either a tactical or a strategic perspective.<sup>47</sup>

As there is no universal definition of terrorism which can be applicable to all the periods of history, each terrorist incident must be understood in its specific social, historical, and political circumstances.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Amalendu Guha, *op.cit.*, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>46</sup> Anwar Syed, 'Causes of Terrorism', *Dawn*, 23 November 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Juliet Lodge, 'Terrorism and Europe: Some General Considerations' in Juliet Lodge (ed.), *The Threat of Terrorism* (London: Wheat Sheaf Books Ltd., 1988), p.5.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan R. White, *op.cit.*, p.9.

### Changing trends

As discussed above, today's terrorism is distinct from the past terrorist activities and tactics. The emergence of transnational religious terrorism, coupled with the advancement in military, communication and transportation technologies have not only enhanced the power of the terrorists and intensified their brutalities, but also increased difficulties to agree upon the basic premises to define the term 'terrorism'.

The advancement of media technology has exacerbated terrorism. There are several reasons for this. First, for terrorists, media is a powerful tool to publicize their goals and objectives, and bring fundamental political change. Without media coverage the impact of the terrorist act is considered to be wasted and residual to only the immediate victims rather than affecting the larger audience. Even if the terrorists fail to achieve their immediate objectives, they remain successful to publicize their cause by getting extensive media coverage.

Second, through media, the terrorists can reach the distance audience very easily, particularly their own sympathizers in foreign countries. The purpose is to let them know their objectives, activities and government's atrocities against the population. In this way, the terrorists not only get sympathies, but also the funding from the people of their community in order to carry out their terrorist activities.

Third, media plays a two-pronged role to exacerbate terrorism. On the one hand, the media coverage to any terrorist incident persuades the people in the victim community to reciprocate the same kind of damage upon the community of the perpetrator, while on the other hand, the extensive coverage of the terrorist act enhances the morale of the perpetrator's community who commemorates the incident and vows to further carry out terrorist acts.

Fourth, to cover any terrorist act, media works in two different directions. On the one hand, the wide media coverage serves the purpose of the terrorists—to publicize and increase sympathies for their cause, while on the other hand, for government the media coverage plays a negative role as it complicates the situation and undermines the government efforts, particularly in cases of hijacking and hostage situations. During such kind of incidents, as Senator Tom Lantos laments, the media mainly focuses on individual tragedies, interviewing the families of people in anguish, in horror, in nightmare. This completely debilitates national policy makers from making rational decisions in the national interest.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.134.

Fifth, the competition among various media channels as a result of the revolution in communication technology has shifted attention from the actual menace, and has exacerbated terrorism. The problem arises when a channel breaks any story. Having broken the story and captured viewers' attention, the priority becomes to hold that attention with equally gripping follow-on reports. Accordingly, for the duration of an important story's life, the media's focus invariably shifts from the reporting of the limited and often dwindling quantity of hard news to more human-interest-type feature stories, mostly involving exclusive interviews or the breathless revelation of some previously unknown or undocumented item of related news—no matter how trivial or irrelevant.<sup>50</sup>

Last, the extensive worldwide media coverage of any terrorist act provides information and incentives to other terrorist groups to imitate and use the same kind of tactics to unleash terrorism. So, the ideas travel through the mass media.

These changing terrorist trends show that the lethality of terrorism has been increasing day by day and in the future the world may witness an unimaginable destruction by the terrorists, who have nothing to lose. For instance, before 1960s, political assassinations and bombings were the common tactics used by the terrorists. During 1960s, the terrorists launched random killings of innocent people. By early 1970s, hostage taking was the main tactics. The late 1970s witnessed a new terrorist trend of hijacking of planes and attacking diplomatic targets, particularly embassies. Another practice, which became popular in 1980s car and suicide bombings, which have been continued to-date. Mid-1980s also saw a new phenomenon of blowing up of airplanes, committed by the Sikh terrorists. In 1990s, the world came across the use of chemical/biological weapons/nerve gas, used by Aum Shinrikiyo in the Tokyo subway. The advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a catastrophic incident when the terrorists used passenger planes to hit the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001.

Bruce Hoffman rightly admits the failure to understand and comprehend Osama bin Laden: his vision, his capabilities, his financial resources and acumen as well as his organizational skills. For bin Laden, the weapons of modern terrorism critically are not only the traditional guns and bombs, but also mini-cam, videotape, television and Internet.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Lessons of 9/11* (Pittsburgh: RAAND, 2002), p.10.



Today, terrorism is like an export industry, where one group is inspired by the activities or ideas of another group, even inter-group cooperation has complicated the situation as much as that a government cannot control this menace single-handedly.

Terrorism has now become an acceptable tool to pressurize governments to materialize various demands. In the past, terrorism has been used to achieve specific and limited goals. Today, the terrorists have a well-defined global agenda. They not only want to establish their rule within their own states, but also all over the world. For them, religious supremacy is the main objective, which, according to them, will eliminate all the societal evils and make the world a safe heaven for all the humanity.

### **Purpose of terrorism**

The purpose of terrorism is to achieve various goals and objectives, which differ from movement to movement and organization to organization. Following are some purposes of terrorist movements and organizations:

First, to spread horror and terror among the masses in order to change their attitude towards the government and society. The threat to generate a greater scale of disaster creates a psychological impact upon the target audience. Consequently, the government is pressurized to accede to their demands.

Second, to provoke the government to take harsh action against the perpetrators and their sympathizers—both active and passive. Government's brutal action enhances the mass support for the terrorists' cause and compels people to think on same lines as terrorists do.

Third, to separate the masses from the incumbent authority. By doing this, the terrorists try to disorient the population by showing that the government is unable to fulfill the primary security functions for its subjects—that is provision of safety and order.<sup>52</sup>

Disorientation occurs when the victim is unable to recognize the source of fear and depends upon someone else, may be a leader, who interprets the events. If the government fails to provide such framework, the ground is ready for the terrorists to offer an alternative, which leads to political instability.<sup>53</sup>

Terrorists execute their acts in such a way as to create a situation in which people are made to believe that what they do and say is right, just and moral and that the government is incapable of protecting the

---

<sup>52</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.34.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

people and their property. Then they create a situation in which the people are tried to be forced to accept the dictates of the terrorists and cooperate with the latter by not only providing food and finance but also giving shelter and sanctuaries.<sup>54</sup> But Grant Wardlaw dissents with this perception that it could be possible in theoretical terms. However in practice, such a strategy often backfires and the use of terrorism may well turn the people, even sympathizers, against the terrorist violence and its perpetrators, and lead to support for the government's efforts to wipe out the terrorists.<sup>55</sup> Once the state's enemies have been labeled as terrorists, the public accepts more in defence against terrorism: illegal arrests, torture and even state-sanctioned murder have been seen in some states as acceptable (or rather, reluctantly accepted as necessary) when one takes off gloves in fighting a ruthless terrorist enemy.<sup>56</sup>

The excessive and indiscriminate use of terrorism alienates the people and their support for the terrorists' cause and the terrorists become unable to even influence the public opinion for their cause. Therefore, for achieving any objective in which terrorism is used as a means, people's support is necessary.

Fourth, to isolate the citizen from social context. The ultimate of the terrorization process occurs when the individual is so isolated as to be unable to draw strength from usual social supports and is cast entirely upon his or her own resources.<sup>57</sup> As a result, terrorism destroys the solidarity, cooperation, and interdependence on which social functioning is based, and substitutes insecurity and distrust.<sup>58</sup>

Fifth, terrorists always strive for legitimacy to their violent activities. A high potential for mass support is necessary for the success and continuation of terrorist violence. Otherwise, it is likely to be counter-productive.

Terrorism on behalf of a state is considered sacred and the person is rewarded on performing a good job. On the other hand, terrorists also seek such kind of rewards in the shape of social approval, which is hard to achieve because both the government and society do not approve it. So, the terrorists always endeavor for legitimacy both within and outside the society.

Sixth, the terrorists always need publicity to their activities. The main purpose of terrorists is that they should be heard and recognized in

---

<sup>54</sup> Panna Kaji Amatya, *op.cit.*, p.69.

<sup>55</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.39.

<sup>56</sup> John Gearson, *op.cit.*, p.10.

<sup>57</sup> Grant Wardlaw, *op.cit.*, p.34.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

the international community. On the other hand, John Gearson argues that publicity has become a difficult question in recent years, given the rise of the unclaimed attack. Given the increasing number of attacks which have been neither claimed nor announced, it has been argued that publicity is no longer a main priority of the perpetrators and that the objectives have changed from achieving ends to simply punishment—terrorists now seem to want people dead.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the purpose of terrorists is to acquire political power both at the domestic and global level. For this, they do not rely on their numerical strength, but the legitimacy of their cause. At the domestic level, there are many actors, such as, ethnic, nationalist, separatist, which are dissatisfied with the existing political system and endeavor to change it through violent means.

To acquire global hegemony for their cause can only be seen in religiously motivated terrorism. The goal is to expand their spiritual values to the non-believers and compel them to accept those values. Injustices at the domestic and international level strengthen the cause of terrorists. The main objective, in this pursuit, is to renounce the western democratic and liberal values, replace them with their code of conduct, and to establish their own government. Though this kind of aspiration seems very difficult to materialize under the present circumstances, the religious terrorists, in order to achieve this goal, may resort to an unimaginable violence.

## Conclusion

Terrorism is an abstract concept and a single definition proves insufficient to define the term and achieve the international consensus. A genuine understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved if it is considered beyond the propaganda purposes, and each terrorist incident is seen in terms of social, political and historical terms.

Various developments took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which compelled the governments to cooperate. For example, hijacking of airplanes, kidnapping and murder of diplomats, nuclear blackmail etc. Also advancement in communication and transport technology played a significant role in this regard. The result is that the localized terrorist activity is felt worldwide.

Today's terrorism is connected with the development of the new technological innovations, and the international community is more concerned about the means and technological access at the disposal of the terrorists, rather than their objectives or cause. The real threat now is

---

<sup>59</sup> John Gearson, *op.cit.*, p.11.

that the traumatic events of September 11 have set a precedent to more terrorist incidents on a large scale. The terrorists can now inflict a more catastrophic destruction to the world at large.

Despite all such known threats and hazards, the world community is still far from reaching a consensus on the definition of terrorism. If it is described as violence against the innocent people or non-combatants for achieving various goals, the application of the term, then, becomes too broad. On the other hand, the definitions dealing with the specific aspects only, reflect the one-sided version. This is usually the version of the stronger power or institution, while ignoring the plight of the weaker segment.

The problem in defining the term will always remain there. This is argued that until a consensual definition is achieved, the world will remain vulnerable to the menace of terrorism and fail to eliminate terrorists in order to make the globe peaceful.

The state must take into account the changing nature of the society and respond accordingly. Any failure to this responsibility may lead to increasing gap between state and society. If institutions do not change sufficiently rapidly there will be a gap between institutional values and practices, their actual and erstwhile constituencies and the environment generally. This can give rise to structural violence, to challenge authority, to the growth of perceptions of relative deprivation and status disequilibrium and, ultimately, to revolutionary activity to change structures using terrorism as a weapon.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> W. Laqueur, *Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), p.50.