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Definition and nature of terrorism

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1.1 Introduction

Terrorism is a highly complex, highly subjective and politically sensitive topic. In this chapter we will address some of this complexity, subjectivity and sensitivity. We will show why and how terrorism is receiving much attention from both the media and governments and how it has affected societies. After discussing the geographical distribution of attacks and casualties, we will arrive at the problem of defining terrorism. We will explore the questions of what can be labelled terrorism and what not, and why it is actually important (and difficult) to define the term. Finally, we will discuss the nature of terrorism: what it is about, what it does to society, and how it works.

That terrorism indeed has an impact on society we can read in the papers and see on television and the internet. In fact, terrorism makes headlines almost every day and almost everywhere around the globe. In recent years, major attacks have taken place in many parts of the world, leaving hardly any region untouched. The most lethal and most 'spectacular' attacks have not only received national attention, but in many cases have made headlines across the world. For instance, the Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 not only were breaking news in France and the rest of Europe, but also resulted in headlines in newspapers as far away as Indonesia. Readers of *Media Indonesia* were confronted with a picture of the attack and its victims with a headline saying, 'Europe on alert after the Paris tragedy'. Other examples are international responses to the many attacks by the terrorist organisation Boko Haram in

Nigeria. Their kidnapping of young girls in April 2014 made it to the front pages of newspapers around the world. The US-based *CBS News* reported, ‘100 schoolgirls kidnapped in Nigeria by suspected extremists’, and the newspaper *China Daily* reported, ‘China condemns Nigeria kidnappings’. US First Lady Michelle Obama and Pope Francis were among the various international figures who joined the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign. Also in 2014, the rise of Islamic State (formerly known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - ISIL) and the atrocities committed by that organisation led to worldwide condemnation. That resulted in a United Nations Security Council Resolution 2170 (15 August 2014) in which the Council deplored and condemned ‘the terrorist acts of ISIL’ in the strongest terms.

But what makes the acts by Islamic State or Boko Haram, and, for instance, the Paris attacks ‘terrorist acts’? When and why do we use that label to describe certain acts of violence? We will discuss this very important question after further exploring the deadliness and geographical scope of attacks that have been labelled terrorist attacks.

1.2 A worldwide phenomenon

Whatever definition one uses, unfortunately, there has not been a single day in recent history in which ‘extremists’ or ‘terrorists’ have not killed or wounded civilians, military personnel, police or others. In the past decade, terrorism has left almost a quarter of a million dead in many parts of the world. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (see box 1.01) of the University of Maryland is one of the very few databases that have collected data on terrorism for a long time. According to that database, there were 106,301 acts of terrorism between 2010 and 2019 – defined as intentional acts of violence or threats of violence by a non-state actor meeting two of the following three criteria:

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law.

Using these criteria, these acts have led to more than 243,000 fatalities and 284,000 injuries in a ten-year timespan between 2010 and 2019. It should be noted that other sources provide different figures, partly depending on the

definitions and methodologies they use, which we will discuss later in this book.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

The University of Maryland does extensive research on both trans- and international terrorist events and presents its data annually in its Global Terrorism Database (GTD), starting in 1970. The GTD is currently maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and consists of over 200,000 terrorist attacks, with information on dozens of variables, such as the nature of the attack and the number of casualties, but also the motive of the perpetrators and the amount of ransom paid in regard to kidnappings. For 2019 it lists 8,495 terrorist attacks, resulting in 20,329 fatalities (and 18,714 injuries) across 61 countries. However, around 40 per cent of the total casualties occurred in just one country: Afghanistan (8,249). Nigeria followed with 1,718 and Yemen suffered 1,223 deaths because of terrorism. Together, more than half of the total casualties were found in these three countries. The actual datasets, along with additional information on research and the methodology of the GTD, can be accessed via their website at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

BOX 1.01 THE GLOBAL TERRORISM DATABASE

Yet not all parts of the world are as much troubled by acts of terrorism as others. In fact, terrorism is a strategic threat – seriously challenging the existing political and social order – in only a limited number of countries. Among the countries that in the last few years have been confronted by extremely high numbers of terrorist attacks are Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Somalia, Yemen and the Philippines.

If we take the incidents reported by the GTD for the period between 2000 and 2019, we see several countries that suffered many more fatalities than others. Iraq heads the list with about 80,000 fatalities in those two decades, followed by Afghanistan with about 57,000, while Nigeria has counted around 27,000 deaths. The fourth on the list is Pakistan with about 22,000 people killed, followed by Syria (17,000), Somalia (12,000), Yemen (12,000) and India (11,000).

Parts of the world with much lower numbers of fatalities and injured people include most western countries. For instance, Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency, reported 21 fatalities across the 27 member states in the year 2020. The US and Canada also suffered very few deaths because of terrorism in the same period. The same holds for other states in the western

hemisphere, such as Brazil and Mexico, which are relatively safe from the terrorist threat (not counting criminal kidnappings or other forms of violence that might ‘terrorise’ the population). The same holds for the largest state in the world in terms of population, the People’s Republic of China. The Chinese are occasionally confronted by fatal terrorist attacks. Nonetheless, the number of reported incidents and casualties has, until recently, been relatively low.

The GTD’s data provide a good overview of the physical threat of terrorism. But there are other ways to measure its seriousness. By combining the data of the GTD, in particular the number of fatalities and injuries, with the amount of property damage the Global Terrorism Index provides a broader picture of the consequences of terrorism. It shows a number of hotspots of terrorism: most parts of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, the Russian Federation and most regions within Africa. These parts of the world are more often confronted by terrorist attacks and their consequences than a number of other regions where terrorism is less of a security issue. Moreover, they are confronted by counterterrorism measures – including the use of violence by states – which add to terrorism-related insecurity. The relatively more fortunate parts of the world in this respect include the remaining parts of Asia, Southern Africa, the Americas, Australia and Europe. In these regions and countries terrorism is a low physical and strategic threat. It does not cause a lot of victims nor does it pose a serious threat to the existing political order. Nonetheless, rightly or wrongly, it is often perceived as a serious threat to societies. Moreover, terrorist attacks, especially major ones such as those on 9/11, have provoked strong counterterrorism measures worldwide.

Key points

- Terrorism has a worldwide impact.
- Although terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon, there are important regional differences.
- Most terrorist attacks take place in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Russia and various parts of Africa.
- Many parts of Asia, the southern part of Africa, the Americas, Australia and Europe are less frequently troubled by terrorism.
- Nonetheless, even in countries with relatively few terrorist attacks, it is often perceived as a serious threat to security.

1.3 Terrorism leading to strong responses around the globe

As mentioned above, not only in the countries where terrorists strike most often, but also in parts of the world where they pose a low physical and strategic threat, terrorism ranks high on the political agenda. It is considered one of the most important and pressing security issues that requires the full attention of politicians and policymakers. Major attacks often result in strong counterterrorism measures, including quite a few that have received criticism linked to fundamental questions about their legitimacy and proportionality.

Human rights organisations in particular believe that much of the post-9/11 counterterrorism legislation is dangerously over-broad and has undermined civil liberties and fundamental human rights. Others have pointed to issues related to efficiency and effectiveness or unwanted negative side effects of counterterrorism. A number of the most controversial measures need mentioning. One of them is the 2001 'Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act', better known by its acronym, the 'PATRIOT Act', which expanded the investigatory instruments of American law enforcement agencies in their combat against terrorism. In the UK, after the 2005 London bombings, Parliament passed several Acts including the 'Terrorism Act 2006', which extended police powers to deal with the encouragement of terrorism both on- and offline, the preparation of terrorist acts and terrorist training, amongst others. Additionally, the Act extended police powers to hold terrorist suspects without charge, doubling the time allowed from 14 to 28 days. Similarly, the rise of western foreign fighters joining the ranks of IS and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq from 2013 onwards was followed by extraordinary measures in several countries. This included laws aimed at revoking the passports or even the citizenship of these fighters.

As these examples indicate, major terrorist attacks or developments can lead to more and more far-reaching counterterrorism legislation. This not only holds for western countries, but strong reactions have also happened in many other parts of the world. The case of India is a clear example. Since its independence in 1947, this country has had a turbulent history of terrorism, having been confronted with, among other things, separatist and Islamist groups in Kashmir, separatist movements in the Punjab and the north-eastern regions, and communist groups in the central part of the country. In response to an attack on India's parliament building in December 2001 by members of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, both separatist and Islamist groups,

the Parliament of India passed the 'Prevention of Terrorism Act' (POTA). Like the US 'PATRIOT Act', POTA faced substantial criticism because of its broad definition of terrorism, rigorous detention procedures and vast investigatory powers. It should be noted that in 2004, after multiple reports of abuse (including cases of detention without charge, police misconduct, lack of judicial and administrative oversight), POTA was repealed by a newly elected government. This was possible in part because the Act had a built-in sunset clause – an expiry date three years after its commencement (see box 1.02).

Sunset clause

Sunset clauses are provisions of law which provide for the expiry of a law at some point in the future. They are employed especially for controversial legislation, passed quickly in response to a crisis such as after a major terrorist attack. They are used to prevent the normalisation of exceptional measures and to allow for democratic accountability through review mechanisms when the law expires. Sunset clauses can take different forms. They can simply state a date on which the legislation will cease to exist. They can automatically trigger a review of legislation, such as an evaluation of its effectiveness and (negative) side effects. Or they can provide for legislation to lapse on a certain date unless there are good reasons to believe that the law should be extended. Sunset clauses and review mechanisms have been recommended by human rights organisations and several international organisations, including the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF).

See for instance the CTITF's 'Basic Human Rights Reference Guide: Conformity of National Counterterrorism Legislation with International Human Rights Law', published in 2014.

BOX 1.02 SUNSET CLAUSE

When looking at these cases, we see a trade-off between security and human rights. Especially after major attacks, in order to gain more security state actors are more willing to compromise on fundamental rights, such as the freedom of expression, the right to privacy and the principle that a prisoner is released from detention when there is a lack of sufficient cause or evidence. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have repeatedly expressed their concern about draconic and disproportional counterterrorism measures by states, especially after large or shocking terrorist attacks.

As terrorism is not only a worldwide, but also a trans-border phenomenon, not only individual countries but also international organisations have come

up with strong measures in reaction to terrorist attacks. The question of how terrorism can best be prevented has been on the agenda of important international organisations, ranging from the United Nations (UN) to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and other regional (security) organisations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the wake of 9/11, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1373 (see box 1.03), which obliges all UN member states to criminalise a number of terrorism-related activities, such as providing financial support for or facilitating terrorist actors. Further measures of the UN to prevent and combat terrorist attacks were defined in its 2006 'Global Counterterrorism Strategy' and include the intensification of cooperation in regard to information exchange and strengthening coordination and collaboration among UN member states in regard to crimes connected to terrorism (such as drug trafficking, money laundering, the illicit arms trade, etc.).

Resolution 1373

Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001), which was adopted unanimously on 28 September 2001 in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks in the US, requested countries to implement a number of measures intended to enhance their legal and institutional ability to counter terrorist activities at home, in their regions and around the world, including taking steps to:

- Criminalise the financing of terrorism; freeze without delay any funds related to persons involved in acts of terrorism; deny all forms of financial support for terrorist groups.
- Suppress the provision of safe havens, sustenance or support for terrorists.
- Share information with other governments on any groups practising or planning terrorist acts.
- Cooperate with other governments in the investigation, detection, arrest, extradition and prosecution of those involved in such acts; and criminalise active and passive assistance for terrorism in domestic law and bring violators to justice.
- The Resolution also calls on States to become parties, as soon as possible, to the relevant international counterterrorism legal instruments.

BOX 1.03 RESOLUTION 1373

In the EU, the 2004 Madrid train bombings in which almost 200 people died provoked strong measures to improve ways to prevent such attacks from happening again. In the wake of the bombings, the Council of the EU felt the need for a body that could foster closer cooperation and coordination in the field of counterterrorism. Among others, it appointed an EU Counterterrorism Coordinator who, as the name suggests, would coordinate the work of

the EU bodies in the field of counterterrorism and improve cooperation between member states. The Madrid bombings also speeded up the process of developing a European-wide strategy. This strategy, the 'European Union Strategy Counterterrorism Strategy. Prevent, Protect, Pursue, Respond', was adopted by the Council a year later. Among other things, it set out to disrupt the activities of networks and individuals who draw people into terrorism and it contained an action plan with new measures. The Madrid bombings and the subsequent London bombings (2005) also sparked a debate on the need to criminalise various terrorism-related offences in all EU member states, such as recruitment and training for terrorism.

Terrorist attacks can also provoke one of the most extraordinary measures: foreign military interventions. Think of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan (2001-2021) and more recent military interventions by (coalitions of) foreign powers to counter terrorism in Somalia (2011), Mali (2013), Libya (2014), Syria and Iraq (2014), to mention just a few. Some of these operations have received not only a lot of attention, but also a lot of criticism from those who regard these measures as disproportional and counterproductive, leading not to less, but to more terrorism, or because they lack a legal mandate. Also making headlines are the many military operations by armed forces in Colombia, Iraq, Israel, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Turkey and many other countries. These operations cause casualties not only among terrorists – or rebels, insurgents or 'opposing forces' – but also among innocent civilians.

Key points

- Terrorist attacks can provoke strong counterterrorism measures.
- Many countries have come up with new and sometimes extraordinary measures after terrorist attacks.
- As terrorism is a global phenomenon, international organisations have also developed new measures, policies and strategies in response to terrorist attacks.
- Military interventions are among the most far-reaching of measures taken after terrorist attacks.
- Some of the strong measures taken after terrorist attacks have been criticised as they have an impact on fundamental rights or cause casualties among innocent civilians.

1.4 The use of the term ‘terrorism’

As mentioned earlier, terrorism makes headlines almost every day in many parts of the world. The words we use to describe attacks and define this phenomenon differ around the world depending on political views, languages, cultures and other factors. Moreover, the way we use the term terrorism today differs from the way we talked about political violence and related groups in previous eras.

In the past certain violent acts, which we might nowadays call acts of terrorism, were not labelled as such. The assassination of William McKinley, the 25th president of the United States, in 1901 is such an example. In the name of anarchism, Leon Czolgosz shot the US president twice at a public appearance in Buffalo. Although McKinley initially seemed to recover, he died as a result of gangrene. In its aftermath, newspapers used different terms to describe the attack. The *Philadelphia Record*, a local paper, simply stated that McKinley was shot twice by an anarchist. It reported that ‘Washington was stunned by the blow’ and it featured a drawing showing where the President was hit. However, the term ‘terrorism’ or ‘terrorist’ was never mentioned.

This is just one example showing how different terms have been used at different times to describe violent political acts by non-state actors. Think of the term ‘freedom fighters’, which is associated with anti-colonialism and the struggle against oppressive regimes. While these fighters were labelled ‘terrorist’ by the authorities, the local population would often see them as honourable defenders who rebelled against an oppressor. Obviously, it depends from what side you look at it or, as the historian Walter Laqueur (1987, p. 7) put it, ‘[o]ne man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’. This often-mentioned phrase can, of course, also be read the other way around. For a critique of the idea that the use of the label ‘terrorist’ or ‘freedom fighter’ is simply a matter of personal opinion, it is worth reading Boaz Ganor’s article (2002) ‘Defining Terrorism: Is One Man’s Terrorist another Man’s Freedom Fighter?’.

The notion of ‘terrorist versus freedom fighter’ is also visible in the report of a British newspaper, *The Dundee Courier*, on Mohandas Gandhi and the state of India in the early 1920s (see box 1.04). The newspaper used terms such as ‘serious anxiety’, ‘open violence’, ‘bloodshed’ and ‘the murder of Britishers’, and referred to Gandhi and his following as a ‘gang of terrorists’. Gandhi’s notion of civil disobedience was equated with ‘open violence’ and he was considered a threat to the stability of the UK and its colonial territory. Roughly a week after

the publication of this report, the authorities convicted Gandhi of sedition and sentenced him to six years in prison. Nowadays, Gandhi is considered one of the world's greatest non-violent leaders and his name is mentioned in the same breath as those of other pioneers of civil rights campaigns, like Dr. Martin Luther King.

'The Peril in India – Fruit of Doctrinaire Policies'

'The international state of India gives cause for serious anxiety, and any reduction of the army is impossible. ... The infamous Gandhi ... is still at liberty. The distinction between his "civil disobedience" campaign and open violence is purely academic. It has led to much bloodshed, and although its author has once more "repented" no reliance can be placed on his promises. ... Now its spread has been so insidious that all our military forces in India might at any time be required to cope with an outbreak of violence. Seditious propaganda has been at work among our native troops, and among the civil population public lectures are openly given advocating the murder of Britishers. ... The loyal population, native as well as European, is at the mercy of gangs of terrorists and assassins.'

Quotation from *the Dundee Courier*, Fruit of Doctrinaire Policies, 9 March 1922.

BOX 1.04 'THE PERIL IN INDIA – FRUIT OF DOCTRINAIRE POLICIES'

As in the 1920s in Gandhi's case, contemporary media play an important role in attributing the labels 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' to certain acts of violence and militant armed groups. By using emotional and denigrating labels, media are able to influence the perception of their audiences and contribute to shaping public opinion. Often, the media are criticised for this. Reporters and editors have been blamed for being irresponsible, making the threat of terrorism or specific incidents larger or more dramatic than they are, thereby contributing to increased levels of fear among the public. The media have also been blamed for contributing to polarisation or, worse, heightened tensions between various ethnic, religious or political groups.

It should, however, be noted that there are also numerous examples in which media have shown restraint. Perhaps in a reaction to the negative image of the media in relation to terrorism, some (but certainly not all) media outlets are becoming more aware of the sensitivity of using the terms 'terrorist' and 'terrorism', and some try to avoid using it altogether. *Reuters*, one of the leading news agencies in the world, is fully aware of the importance of impartiality and objectivity in the news business and claims to allow its readership to make its own assessments. In the section on terrorism in the

Reuters 'Handbook on Terrorism Journalism' (2014), the agency advises its reporters and editors to avoid the terms 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' whenever possible (see box 1.05). Although seemingly solid advice, it should also be stressed that it is both difficult and problematic to demand restraint from journalists and editors. Of course, the media are attracted by terrorist acts and can and should not ignore them or play down these incidents as it is their duty to report on any major event. They are also attracted by terrorism because the dramatic and spectacular aspects of this phenomenon fascinate their audience, the general public. However, terrorists aim to influence that same audience and themselves try to make use of the media. The staging of extreme and spectacular attacks is partly done to attract the maximum attention and to make headlines around the globe.

In recent years, there seems to be more awareness of the importance of limiting the platform that terrorists might seek and often get. In the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019, where an extreme right-wing terrorist killed about 50 people in two mosques, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, phrased it as follows: the attacker 'sought many things from his act of terror, but one was notoriety – that is why you will never hear me mention his name'. Similarly, after a jihadist killed French school teacher Samuel Paty, who had discussed cartoons of the prophet Mohammad in class, French President Emmanuel Macron said that he would not talk about such 'cowards' who committed such attacks: 'they no longer even have names'. Limiting the platform of terrorists was restricted not only to their names. After the attack in Nice in 2016, the French newspaper *Le Monde* announced that it would no longer publish pictures of the perpetrators to avoid possible glorification.

The *Reuters* 'Handbook on Journalism'

'We may refer without attribution to terrorism and counterterrorism in general but do not refer to specific events as terrorism. Nor do we use the word terrorist without attribution to qualify specific individuals, groups or events. Terrorism and terrorist must be retained when quoting someone in direct speech. ... Terror as in terror attack or terror cell should be avoided, except in direct quotes. Report the subjects of news stories objectively, their actions, identity and background. Aim for a dispassionate use of language so that individuals, organizations and governments can make their own judgment on the basis of facts. Seek to use more specific terms like "bomber" or "bombing", "hijacker" or "hijacking", "attacker" or "attacks", "gunman" or "gunmen" etc.'

BOX 1.05 THE REUTERS 'HANDBOOK ON JOURNALISM'

The use of the term ‘terrorism’ and its definitions and connotations have changed over the years. Some anarchists were proud to use the term to describe themselves, whereas the militants of the anti-colonial wave regarded themselves as freedom fighters and strongly rejected the label ‘terrorist’. The use of the term is very subjective. While the victims of an attack or hostage taking are likely to perceive this event as an act of terrorism, for which there is no justification, the perpetrators often consider their actions to be justifiable within their own system of beliefs and values, or as part of a (defensive) struggle against aggression or oppression. Finally, there is disagreement over the question whether or not states can or should be labelled terrorists or whether we should use a different word for states or regimes using the instrument of terror. Think of the many demonstrations after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia with people holding signs saying ‘Putin is a terrorist’. Can a head of state be labelled a terrorist or are there other labels more apt to describe political leaders who use violence against civilians? In the next section we will concentrate on this and other difficult questions regarding the definition of terrorism.

Key points

- The use of the word ‘terrorism’ has changed over the years.
- In history we have seen events that we did not at the time label terrorism, but we would now.
- Yet the opposite has also happened: events and individuals we used to refer to as terrorism and terrorists are now perceived differently.
- Media are important actors as regards the framing of specific events and actors.
- Some, but definitely not all, contemporary media outlets have become more aware of the subjectivity and impact of the use of the term ‘terrorism’.

1.5 Why is there no generally accepted definition?

Changes in the use of the term of terrorism across time and languages have created confusion and disagreement among both scholars and politicians about how to define the term. But why is it so difficult to agree on a functional, let alone a legal, definition? This is perhaps best explained by Alex Schmid, one of the most renowned scholars in the field of terrorism and counterterrorism studies. In his article, ‘Terrorism – The Definitional Problem’ (2004), he gives four reasons for the fact that there is no generally accepted definition: (1) ‘Terrorism is a “contested concept” and political, legal, social science and popular notions of it are often diverging’; (2) ‘the definition

question is linked to (de-)legitimization and criminalization'; (3) 'there are many types of "terrorism", with different forms and manifestations'; (4) 'the term has undergone changes of meaning in the more than 200 years of its existence'.

Let us have a closer look at each of these four reasons, starting with the notion that terrorism is a rather contested concept. According to Schmid, it has a strong emotional and moral undertone which makes it difficult to apply to specific events or groups. An individual who is considered to be a terrorist by one conflict party is often considered to be a freedom fighter by the others. It is to some extent a matter of perspective whether a certain act can be regarded as an act of terrorism or as a part of a legitimate struggle for freedom. The late Yasser Arafat, former President of the Palestinian National Authority, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 for his role in the Oslo Peace Accords, along with the Israeli politicians Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres (see box 1.06). However, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), of which he was the chairman from 1969, was considered a terrorist organisation by both Israel and the US at least until 1991.

Yasser Arafat

Yasser Arafat was a chairman of the PLO, an organisation founded in 1964 with the purpose of creating an independent Palestine. It tried to achieve this goal by using violence against a wide variety of targets, both inside and outside Israel. This made the PLO one of the most renowned or infamous armed non-state organisations in the world. Its leader was, for some, the archetypical terrorist or freedom fighter, depending on one's position as regards the PLO. Arafat operated from several Arab countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. His organisation gradually transformed into a quasi-state actor that started to accept Israel's right to exist in peace and to reject the use of violence and terrorism. In response, Israel officially recognised the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and the Palestinian National Authority of which Arafat became the first President. Later in his career, Arafat engaged in a series of negotiations with the government of Israel. For his constructive role in these he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. Arafat's award was the subject of controversy. In the eyes of most Palestinians, Arafat was a heroic freedom fighter for their cause, while many Israelis continued to regard him as an unabashed terrorist.

BOX 1.06 YASSER ARAFAT

Another example of the ambiguity surrounding a rebel, insurgent or ‘terrorist’ leader when it comes to terminology is Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Despite the fact that the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation in Turkey, the EU and the US, he is considered a hero and a freedom fighter by many people with a Kurdish background. Even with regard to Osama bin Laden, the late leader of al-Qaeda who was held responsible for the attacks on 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, there is no unanimity over the use of the label ‘terrorist’. He had many followers: among them people who admire him for his stand against western foreign policy and ‘infidel’ and corrupt regimes in the Islamic world. In many countries in that part or the world one could buy t-shirts or posters of the leader of al-Qaeda that would glorify him.

Turning to the western hemisphere, a similar ambiguity existed with regard to Che Guevara. He was an Argentinian Marxist revolutionary and a major figure of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 which overthrew the regime of the corrupt Cuban President, Fulgencio Batista. ‘Che’ became a symbol of rebellion in the 1960s and today his picture is still a frequently seen icon in popular culture. It is entirely plausible that if he were to conduct his paramilitary activities today, many governments would be quick to label him a terrorist.

An example of a self-proclaimed fighter for independence is Anders Breivik. In 2011, he bombed a government building in Oslo, Norway, and subsequently opened fire on members of the youth organisation of the Norwegian Labour Party on the island of Utøya, killing 77 people in cold blood. Breivik claimed to be acting in self-defence, calling himself a resistance fighter. He justified his crime by claiming that his victims were part of a ‘conspiracy’ that was trying to ‘deconstruct’ the cultural identity of Norway by embracing immigration and multiculturalism. In 2012, Breivik wrote a letter to the far-right extremist, Beate Zschäpe of the National Socialist Underground (NSU), who had been involved in murdering nine people with an immigrant background and a police officer in Germany. Breivik called her a ‘courageous heroine of national resistance’ and said that they both were ‘martyrs for the conservative revolution’.

A second reason why it is so difficult to agree on a universally accepted (legal) definition is its link to the (de)legitimation and criminalisation of the individual or group that receives the label of terrorist. Organisations that are registered on national or international lists of designated terrorist organisations are considered to be criminal. This gives governments a number of instruments to combat them, such as freezing their assets or arresting their

members. The US, as well as supra- and international organisations such as the UN and the EU, maintains such lists. Governments and international organisations are put under pressure by other governments, lobby groups or activists to list or delist certain groups. It should be noted that groups are more frequently listed than delisted.

One organisation that has been confronted with repeated calls to be put on the EU list of terrorist organisations is the Lebanese organisation Hezbollah, a Shi'a Islamist militant group and political party. Advocates of listing Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation refer to its alleged involvement in violent activities both inside and outside Lebanon, such as the terrorist attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in 2012, or its involvement in conflicts in different parts of the Islamic world, such as the civil war in Syria. As a consequence of its alleged involvement, the EU blacklisted the military wing of Hezbollah in 2013, 16 years after it was designated a terrorist organisation by the US State Department. Other states, such as Iran, do not regard Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, expressed their concerns about adding it to the list and continue to back the group. A second example is the Gülen movement, led by Muslim preacher Fethullah Güllen, who has been living in the United States for more than 20 years. The government of Turkey refers to the group as the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation and proscribed it as a terrorist organisation, a move that was followed by Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Yet, many other countries disagree and the group does not feature on the EU or UN list of terrorist organisations.

The third reason Schmid has identified as complicating the process of finding a common legal definition is the fact that there are many types of 'terrorism', with different forms and manifestations. For example, Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency, identifies five different ideological strands of terrorism: (1) religiously-inspired terrorism; (2) ethno-nationalist and separatist terrorism; (3) left-wing and anarchist terrorism; (4) right-wing terrorism; and (5) single-issue terrorism.

To make things more complicated one could add a sixth category, that of attacks by small groups or individuals with a very vague political idea or ideology, who are mainly inspired by personal issues and (foiled) ambitions that one could label 'personal terrorism' or 'ego terrorism' (see box 1.07).

'Ego terrorism'

Terrorist acts committed by actors who operate more or less on their own initiative with little or no support from others are not new. In the past decade

their numbers have grown. Many of them are often indirectly linked to groups and ideologies. However, there are quite a large number who do not fit into one of the categories of terrorism. Their ideological background is not clear and they seem to be primarily driven by personal grievances and motivations. One could label this group of perpetrators examples of ‘personal terrorism’ or ‘ego terrorism.’ This development seems to be in line with trends in society: individualisation and ‘de-ideologisation.’ It is also in line with the basic need and societal pressure to be successful, to be seen in a society that puts pressure especially on young people. The main motivation of ego terrorists is to deal with personal issues and to be seen by conducting attacks on targets that can be linked to a political issue. Think of the case of the attack on the queen of the Netherlands (see box 1.12). The phenomenon can be compared to school shootings except that the target is of a political nature.

BOX 1.07 ‘EGO TERRORISM’

Think, for instance, of ‘incels’, an abbreviation of ‘involuntary celibates’. This term refers to a (mostly online) movement of predominantly men who are frustrated at being unable to get a romantic partner. ‘Incels’ have been involved in various acts of violence. In the Canadian city of Toronto in 2018, Alek Minassian drove over various people with his van, killing 11. Some scholars say that such attacks should be labelled as terrorism because they are motivated by an ideology of male supremacy and misogyny, while others say that the centrality of personal grievances and lack of a clear political ideology mean that they should not be considered as such. Perhaps a seventh category, and a politically sensitive one, is that of state terrorism, also referred to as regime terrorism. Some protesters against the invasion of Ukraine see Vladimir Putin as an example of a leader who not only suppresses his own people, think of opposition leaders, war protesters and – in the past – the Chechen minority, but also those of neighbouring countries. For more on terror by states see box 1.08.

Bruce Hoffman on terror by states

In this textbook we understand terrorism to mean certain violent acts by non-state entities. Many might disagree with this limitation, claiming that a number of states also use the instrument of terror. Interestingly, the term ‘terrorism’ was initially used to refer to the ‘regime de la terreur’ after the French Revolution. The new regime under Maximilien de Robespierre aimed to consolidate its rule by terrorising counter-revolutionaries and other dissidents. According to Bruce Hoffman in *Inside Terrorism* (2006, pp. 15-16), ‘[c]ertainly, similar forms of state-imposed or state-directed violence and terror against a government’s own citizens continue today. The use of so-

called “death squads” ... in conjunction with blatant intimidation of political opponents, human rights and aid workers, student groups, labour organizers, journalists and others has been a prominent feature of the right-wing military dictatorships But these state-sanctioned or explicitly ordered acts of internal political violence directed mostly against domestic populations – that is, rule by violence and intimidation by those already in power against their own citizenry – are generally termed “terror” in order to distinguish that phenomenon from “terrorism”, which is understood to be violence committed by non-state entities.’

BOX 1.08 BRUCE HOFFMAN ON TERROR BY STATES

The fourth and final reason given by Schmid to explain the difficulties in defining terrorism is the fact that the term ‘terrorism’ has several times changed its semantic focus. Originally, ‘terrorism’ referred to the phenomenon of state terror during the 1793-1794 ‘Reign of Terror’, initiated by the authorities when they feared that the French Revolution might be crushed by foreign interventions. According to Schmid (2004) terrorism was initially not used to describe the use of political violence against the state. This changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, what is meant by the term partly changed, together with the methods and targets of terrorism. The nature of the phenomenon today is in many respects different from the terrorism during the Reign of Terror at the height of the French Revolution. Then the iconic weapon of regime terrorism was the guillotine. Today, it is the suicide bomber with sticks of explosives around his or her body.

Key points

- Scholars and politicians do not agree on how to define terrorism.
- Terrorism is a contested concept: ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’.
- It is difficult to come to a generally accepted definition because of the (de)-legitimation and criminalisation of the phenomenon.
- Another complicating factor is that there are many types of terrorism with different forms and manifestations.
- Finally, the nature of terrorism has changed through the course of history.
- Some terrorists today might be primarily motivated by personal issues and ambitions; we might label this ‘ego terrorism’.
- Violence by states against their own citizens is usually not labelled as terrorism.

1.6 The need for a definition

In the previous sections we discussed some difficulties with regard to arriving at a universally accepted or legal definition of terrorism. This lack of consensus is problematic, as such a definition would be extremely valuable from both an academic and a societal perspective. The need to reach a common definition is manifest in three different domains: (1) that of international cooperation; (2) the legal domain; and (3) the academic domain.

First, in order to achieve success within the international domain, states need to agree on what terrorism consists of. As we have witnessed, terrorism is a transnational issue which requires international cooperation, since most individual states do not have the instruments to track and deal with terrorism outside their domestic territory. However, international cooperation, for example the sharing of terrorism-related data, requires a certain level of consensus on what terrorism is. Cooperating states need to find agreement on questions such as: who are we fighting, and what is a terrorist organisation or network? We already highlighted some difficulties with regard to the listing of certain groups as designated terrorist organisations. A lack of cooperation due to the absence of a general definition can also result in the refusal of certain states to share information on terrorists and extradite terrorist suspects. A universal legal definition of terrorism and consensus as to which groups to label terrorist and which not would be highly beneficial to international cooperation.

Second, within the legal domain there is the need to develop a common legal definition of terrorism. According to human rights organisations, the lack of a precise definition of terrorism is an invitation to abuse. When terrorism is not strictly defined it can open the political space for government agencies to use the term in a way that suits their special interests. It is very tempting, especially for more authoritarian regimes, to stretch the definition of terrorism in order to achieve certain goals that have nothing to do with countering terrorism. For instance, by labelling demonstrations or other types of political action as terrorism, authoritarian regimes are able to silence all kinds of opposition groups. These governments can charge those groups with terrorism-related activities and arrest and convict their leaders and supporters. Non-governmental organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) have expressed concern about human rights violations committed as a result of vaguely worded definitions of terrorism. The overly broad nature of these definitions allows the authorities to enforce them rather arbitrarily.

An example is provided by HRW in its report, “In a Legal Black Hole” Sri Lanka’s Failure to Reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act’ (2022). For 40 years the country used the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) mostly to fight the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, also known as ‘Tamil Tigers’) which was active between 1976 and 2009 and aimed to get an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka. In 2022, the Sri Lankan government finally changed its counterterrorism policies in response to strong criticism. While HRW applauded some developments, it noted that the amended PTA still does not provide a clear definition of the term ‘terrorism’. This means that it can be used to target ethnic and religious minorities and curtail political dissent. Human rights organisations have noted such patterns with regard to counterterrorism legislation in many countries. A wide range of activities are often considered as terrorist activities or terrorism-related activities, with the consequence that ordinary crimes such as murder, assault and kidnapping are now treated under terrorism laws. Given these broad definitions, it is easier for regimes with malicious intent to label common protestors terrorists. A generally accepted and clear-cut definition could limit certain abuses by governments.

A commonly accepted legal definition is also important for private companies. Increasingly, they can be held accountable if they provide services to terrorists. Think of the role of social media companies that need to remove content linked to terrorism (see box 1.09) or banks that have to combat the financing of terrorism and can do so only when they can properly check what organisation or individual should be regarded as a terrorist. A generally accepted legal definition and commonly accepted lists of terrorist organisations are essential to being able to do this in an effective way and without unintended side effects. Think of innocent customers who might be excluded from certain financial services because they belong to groups in society that are associated with terrorism, or aid organisations or other NGOs that work in areas where there is a lot of terrorism.

Taking down online extremist content

The Christchurch mosque shootings revived debates on the policies of hosting service providers in relation to taking down extremist content. The attacker had livestreamed his violence and the footage had been widely shared across various platforms on the internet. Representatives of states and hosting service providers met in Paris in May 2019 for the Christchurch Call to Action Summit, where they expressed their commitment to ‘eliminat[ing] terrorist and violent extremist countries online’. While progress has been made, companies still struggle with detecting such videos in time. A few months after the summit, a right-wing extremist in the German city of Halle

livestreamed his attack on a synagogue and kebab shop for 35 minutes before it was taken down. In 2021, after years of debate, the European Parliament adopted a law that forces hosting services to remove terrorist content within one hour after receiving a notification. While there is widespread support for the principle of removing terrorist content, critics argue that this might lead to the over-removal of content as companies do not want to run the risk of getting fined, and so limiting freedom of expression. Others raised worries that more authoritarian regimes could flag content by the political opposition as terrorism propaganda, forcing online platforms to remove it quickly.

BOX 1.09 TAKING DOWN ONLINE EXTREMIST CONTENT

The third domain, academia, would also benefit from a generally accepted definition of terrorism. Researchers in the field of terrorism studies are often confronted with different definitions that hamper, for instance, comparative studies. An example that clearly illustrates this problem is the discrepancy in the number of casualties of terrorism counted by different sources, such as the US State Department, Europol and the GTD. This discrepancy is the consequence of the different definitions adopted by those institutions. In practice, this entails that some cases are included in one dataset and excluded in another, which results in different representations of terrorism. Because these institutions adopt different definitions as the basis of their research, it is difficult to compare their findings and make statements on contemporary terrorism (see box 1.10).

Definitions and methodologies and comparative research

Various organisations try to monitor the number of people killed because of terrorism worldwide. Three of the most well-known ones are the GTD, the US Department of State (DOS) and the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) published by the Institute for Economic & Peace. Using different definitions and methodologies leads to different figures. For the year 2019 the number of fatalities was 25,000 (DOS), 21,000 (GTD) and 14,000 (GTI). In other words, the highest estimate reports 80 per cent more fatalities than the lowest one. Also important to note is that some databases sometimes change the definition that they use. For instance, the country reports on terrorism by the DOS employed three different ways to calculate terrorism deaths between 2010 and 2019. This makes it very complicated for researchers to compare data and to carry out a proper analysis of these figures. That is why it is important always to look at the methodology sections of databases and statistical reports.

BOX 1.10 DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGIES AND COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

It should be noted that definition problems are not unique to the study of terrorism and counterterrorism. In social sciences, defining any social phenomenon is a challenge, let alone agreeing on a single functional definition. Take, for instance, ‘poverty’, ‘happiness’ or ‘discrimination’. There are many ways to define these phenomena, resulting in different approaches or policies to deal with them.

Key points

- Although it has proven to be difficult to reach consensus on a definition of terrorism, one would be very valuable.
- A definition would improve international cooperation, as it would help states and international organisations to agree on whom and what to fight.
- A clear-cut definition would also limit the abuse of legal instruments by states under the pretence of counterterrorism measures and would help private actors to avoid delivering services to terrorists without negative side effects to other customers.
- An academic consensus definition of terrorism could improve the quality of research, especially comparative research.

1.7 Definition attempts

Although it has been impossible to reach consensus on a definition of terrorism, the previous section has highlighted why such a consensus would be extremely valuable. The importance of a single legal definition of terrorism has not gone unnoticed, as leading public figures have made an attempt at crafting one (see box 1.11). Former Secretary General of the UN Kofi Annan tried to grasp what he considered to be the nature of terrorism and translate it into a viable working definition. In late 2006 UN member states agreed on a common strategy for combating terrorism titled ‘Uniting Against Terrorism – Recommendations for a Global Counterterrorism Strategy’. Despite this UN strategy, an attempt to reach consensus on a definition of terrorism failed miserably. Such a definition has hitherto not been formulated due to some of the difficulties outlined above. The definition of the Secretary-General’s ‘High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change’ (2004) read as follows, ‘[a]ny action, in addition to actions already specified by the existing conventions on aspects of terrorism, the Geneva Conventions and Security Council Resolution 1566 (2004), that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain

from doing any act'. However, in light of the conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and that between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, some Muslim states hold that under certain circumstances, in particular foreign occupation, violence is not necessarily unjustified, and therefore should not be labelled as terrorism. According to these member states, a legal definition of terrorism should include state terrorism and make allowances for the struggle for self-determination. However, accepting such conditions would affect not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also disputes over other contested territories.

This brings up the question of the context in which certain 'terrorist' or 'terror' acts take place. Can we speak of terrorism in an ongoing war or war-like situation? Is terrorism only a peace-time phenomenon, and should we speak of insurgencies or guerrilla warfare within the context of war? The Supreme Court of India once adopted Schmid's suggestion to choose a restricted legal definition of terrorist acts being the peacetime equivalents of war crimes. According to Schmid (1993, p. 12), 'such a definition might exclude some forms of violence and coercion (such as attacks on the military, hijackings for escape and destruction of property) currently labelled "terrorism" by some governments'. It should be stressed that any attempt to take this approach will run into another problem; that of defining war and answering the related crucial question of what forms of organised, politically focused violence constitute war.

Examples of definitions of terrorism

- Political scientist Martha Crenshaw: '[t]errorism is a conspiratorial style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behaviour of multitude audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the attention of the many. Terrorism is not mass or collective violence but rather the direct activity of small groups'. Crenshaw, M. (1995), *Terrorism in Context*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 4.
- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: '[t]errorism is the deliberate and systematic assault on civilians to inspire fear for political ends'. Netanyahu, B. (1995), *Terrorism: How the West Can Win*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- UN Secretary General Kofi Annan: '[a]ny action constitutes terrorism if it is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians and non-combatants, with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a Government or international organization to do or abstain from doing an act'. United Nations News Centre. (2005).

BOX 1.11 EXAMPLES OF DEFINITIONS OF TERRORISM

While the international community is still unable to agree on a universal *legal* definition of terrorism, a somewhat higher degree of agreement has begun emerging in the academic community since Schmid made several efforts to bring academics to the same page. In the 1980s Schmid identified 22 components that could be found regularly in various academic, administrative and legal definitions of terrorism. Based on these frequently used elements, he composed the following definition in 1988 with Albert Jongman (p. 28): '[t]errorism 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 targets (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.'

In 2011 Schmid revised his academic consensus definition again, based on a new round of consultations with members of academia and others. He included the most prominent elements, such as the political nature of the threat, and the use or threat of use of force, but also elements such as arbitrariness of target selection (e.g. targets of opportunity, representative or symbolic nature) and mechanisms (e.g. intimidation, coercion, propaganda). What is remarkable, and of course up for debate, is the inclusion of states as potential terrorist actors. So far, this particular issue has divided academia, the UN, experts in international law and many others.

Nonetheless, the search for a definition continues ... and continues to get lost. Or, as Brian Jenkins in an interview with Lisa Stampnitzky (2013, p. 5) put it: '[d]efinitional debates are the great Bermuda Triangle of terrorism research. I've seen entire conferences go off into definitional debates, never to be heard from again.' And even with a proper definition, defining certain groups and events remains difficult. For instance, as the academic consensus definition of Schmid shows, many regard terrorism not to be primarily or ultimately aimed at the direct victims. Instead, it is widely considered a practice or doctrine of using physical violence to instill fear in order to get a political message across. Yet what message is not always very clear (see box 1.12).

How would you label this?

In 2009, The Netherlands was shaken by the live images of a car sweeping through a crowd during the festivities on 'queen's day' in the city of Apeldoorn. The footage of bodies flying through the air reached millions right in their living rooms. The perpetrator drove his car into the crowd in the direction of a bus with most members of the royal family in it. He missed the open-topped bus by only a couple of metres and crashed into a monument. He accused the crown prince of being a fascist and a racist, just before he died in his crashed car. The question is how to label such an incident: as an act of terrorism or something else? The Dutch authorities were quick to say that it was not a terrorist attack. At the press conference some four hours after the attack, the public prosecutor stated that while they had reason to assume that the attack was premeditated, there was no reason to assume any link to terrorism. Investigations into the perpetrator did not provide many clues about why he had wanted to attack the royal family. He left no note or anything else that could link him to a certain group or movement or political ideology. Was this a terrorist incident or not? He did target one of the ultimate symbols of politics in The Netherlands, the queen and the soon to-be king, in other words, the head of state. The GTD included the attack in its database as a terrorist incident. How would you have labelled the attack?

BOX 1.12 HOW WOULD YOU LABEL THIS?

Fortunately, there are a number of governmental and academic definitions that are used quite often. Think of Schmid's definition, the definition used by the GTD and the EU's. Nonetheless, these and others remain contested. Yet the search for a generally accepted definition will undoubtedly continue in the years to come.

Key points

- There have been various attempts to arrive at a generally accepted definition of terrorism over the past decades by academics and by the UN.
- Although there is no consensus on a universal legal definition, there appears to be some agreement on a number of key elements of terrorism.
- These elements are the idea that terrorism is a tool, a mechanism or an instrument to spread fear by the use of violence in order to affect politics and society as a whole.

1.8 Key elements of terrorism

In the previous section we discussed attempts to arrive at a generally accepted definition. We observed that although there is no consensus on a universal legal definition, there appears to be some level of agreement on the idea that terrorism is a tool, a mechanism or an instrument to spread fear by the use of violence to affect politics and society as a whole. So there is more or less agreement on the idea that terrorism is an instrument or a tactic of certain actors to achieve certain political goals. The use of force or violence is an important part of this instrument or tactic.

Terrorists use force or the threat of force to intimidate their opponents. The most common weapons and methods of attack that terrorists use as part of their ‘modus operandi’ – method of operating – change over time. Terrorists perpetrate attacks by shooting, stabbing or using various explosives. In recent decades, as we will discuss in the next chapter, terrorists have increasingly engaged in suicide bombings. They have also used items that are not traditionally seen as weapons; think of the use of aeroplanes (the attacks on 9/11) and trucks and other vehicles. In some cases terrorists have also used biological and chemical substances, and the sum of all fears is that terrorists might get their hands on nuclear weapons. Some terrorist groups have shown an interest in using these substances or have tried to acquire weapons of mass destruction, and trends in technology have increased worries over what is called CBRN terrorism (see box 1.13).

Worries over CBRN terrorism

CBRN terrorism is the name for terrorism in which the perpetrators make use of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons or materials. The UN Counterterrorism Centre (UNCCT) regards the prospect of terrorists gaining access to and using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials and weapons of mass destruction as a serious threat to international peace and security. The UNCCT observes that, over the years, terrorist groups have tested new ways and means to acquire and use more dangerous weapons to maximise damage and incite terror, including weapons incorporating CBRN materials. It also sees that, with advancements being made in technology and the expansion of legal and illegal commercial channels, including on the dark web, some of these weapons have become increasingly accessible.

BOX 1.13 WORRIES OVER CBRN TERRORISM

Not all forms of terrorist violence are lethal or aimed at causing serious bodily harm. Examples of these kinds of attack are kidnappings and hostage

takings. Terrorists have often used such forms of violence to receive ransom or to pressure governments to meet their political demands. There are also various examples of terrorists using hostage takings to press for the release of their imprisoned companions. Some definitions of terrorism also include the credible threat of force as an act of terrorism. A topic of contention is the question whether something like 'cyberterrorism' exists. While cyberattacks might not necessarily lead to physical harm, they could disrupt the fundamental structures of societies and could influence political decision-making and influence political opinion in a non-democratic and illegal way. Think of the use of ransomware and spreading fake news that forces governments to do something or to refrain from doing something or which influences public opinion.

A well-known scholar who was one of the first to emphasise that terrorism is not primarily about killing people is Jenkins. In 1975, he wrote that terrorists want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead. His statement is still true for most cases of terrorism. Although it looks as if at least some of today's terrorists 'also want a lot of people dead' – as Jenkins himself noted after the attacks on 9/11 – the essence of terrorism is sending a message to people other than the direct victims.

Connected to this is the fact that the use of violence is not a goal in itself. In other words: terrorists do not kill just to kill, but to have an impact on those who continue to live: society, you and me, and politics. In some cases, however, the goal is to kill certain individuals, political leaders, journalists or religious leaders. But even in these cases these individual targets represent something bigger – a political party or a state, the elite or specific groups in society, or a particular religion.

This means that the direct targets of terrorists are often not the main targets. The almost 3,000 victims of the 9/11 attacks were not the prime targets of the al-Qaeda terrorist cells. The main targets were those watching the footage and pictures of the people killed in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania. In the eyes of al-Qaeda their chosen locations – the 'capitalist' World Trade Center and the 'imperialist' Pentagon – had high symbolic value and served as a means, rather than an end, as hard as that may sound to the families and friends of those who died. To terrorists, the direct targets are hardly ever the main targets and the violence is aimed at the audience, rather than at the casualties directly affected. In a way, the main target is us, and the terrorists' strategy is to kill a few in order to frighten many others.

Terrorists want to hurt not only those they attack, but also many others. They want people to be afraid, to be angry, to overreact. Unfortunately, they often manage to frighten many people, not only in major attacks, but also with smaller ones. The impact of terrorism on society can sometimes be very high. Media are very important in spreading fear. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once called media attention the ‘oxygen’ for the terrorists. But the same holds for politicians and public figures, who often tend to overreact. Terrorists want to spread a political message and aim to provoke certain strong reactions. As a result, terrorism poses a significant threat to many countries, but not in physical terms – although too many people die because of terrorism – but in socio-political terms. The impact of terrorism on politics and society – on our daily lives, how we live together, on relationships between communities and between countries – can be enormous. The impact of terrorism can also be very high in economic terms; think of the disruption to, for instance, tourism in countries where this is a major source of income. The impact of terrorism is thus mostly determined by what happens after an attack and how various actors respond to it. The attack itself is a means to set this process in motion.

Knowing this essential part of the workings of terrorism, maybe we should try harder not to be afraid, not to overreact. An example of such an attempt is the social movement and slogan ‘we are not afraid’. In many different countries, citizens have expressed their resilience to terrorism after attacks by using this particular slogan or shown the terrorists in other ways that they will not give them what they want. In chapter 6 we will further elaborate on the need to deal with fear and to limit the impact of terrorism.

Key points

- Terrorism is a tool or tactic, not a goal in itself.
- Terrorists use different types of force or violence.
- The aim is to kill a few in order to frighten many others.
- Terrorists aim to have an impact on politics and society.

1.9 Conclusion

In this chapter we looked into the impact of terrorism and the definition of the term. First we showed how terrorism makes headlines around the world almost every day. We have also given an overview of the geographical distribution of terrorist attacks and the number of casualties. Discussing these data we learned that Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan and Nigeria

are among the countries that have been hardest hit by terrorism in recent years. Despite the fact that terrorism as a phenomenon is less common in the West, we saw that it is considered one of the most important security issues in the US and Europe, especially after 9/11. In these parts of the world and elsewhere, governments have invested in more and tougher counterterrorism measures. As a consequence, laws have been designed that have largely criminalised terrorism-related activities and expanded the investigatory instruments of national law enforcement agencies. While governments have generally tended to justify these changes by pointing to the success stories of disasters prevented, we also noted that others have expressed their concerns with regard to violations of human rights that have further added to the negative impact of terrorism on societies.

Discussing the number of attacks and victims we touched upon the issue of the definition of terrorism. What makes an incident a terrorist attack, and what makes a group a terrorist one? These are difficult questions as there is no generally accepted definition of the term. Many terms are used to describe comparable phenomena that some may label terrorism and others would give another name to. There are many reasons why defining terrorism is difficult. We described the dynamic nature of terrorism and explained how it has changed significantly throughout time and that it comes in many different shapes and sizes. Its subjective and politically sensitive nature further complicates reaching consensus on a definition. Ideally, we would arrive at a common legal definition, as it would improve, for instance, international cooperation in counterterrorism. We showed that within the academic world Schmid has accumulated many of the elements of definitions by scholars and crafted a definition that is generally considered to be the closest to consensus. According to Schmid, fear is a major component of terrorism. Moreover, rather than 'simply' killing a lot of people, terrorists are seeking some type of (political) change. In order to achieve this, terrorists try to instigate fear in society and to affect politics and societies. Following this argument, we should do more to limit this impact, the possibilities of which we will explore in chapter 6.

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